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The Virgin birth of our Lord



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THE VIRGIN BIRTH OF
OUR LORD

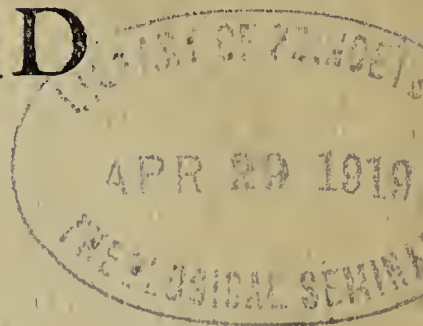
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THE VIRGIN BIRTH
OF
OUR LORD



BY THE REV.
LEONARD PRESTIGE, M.A.

Fellow, Lecturer, and Dean of Divinity,
New College, Oxford

LONDON: ROBERT SCOTT
ROXBURGHE HOUSE
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PREFACE

LECTORI BENEVOLO

THERE are two absolutely different classes of people into whose hands it may chance that this book may fall, and I should like to ask for the consideration of each class on entirely different grounds. In the first place there are those, the infinitely greater number as I believe, to whom the teaching function of the Church has a very definite meaning. They hold that one of the primary duties of the Church is to teach, and to do so, like Christ, with authority and not as the scribes. A disciple is one who is taught, as the Greek word implies: Christ's last charge to his followers was that they should go and make such disciples of all nations. They had a definite message to convey from him to their converts, which nothing could alter: if man or angel were to preach any other gospel he should be held accursed. But suppose that in the presentation of that message error might creep in. Even this possibility had allowance made for it. The Holy Ghost should inspire the Church and lead it into all truth, as well as recalling to the minds of the disciples all that Christ had told them: nothing essential was to be permitted to fall into oblivion, nothing untrue was to be admitted to the presentation of that message carried by the Church from Christ to men; fuller light was to be granted, as different aspects came under review, and accurate expression was to be evolved by slow degrees; but falsehood in a point of fact deliberately and formally asserted is inconceivable upon the theory of the Church's inspiration which I have outlined.

Now at every baptism, since about the year 150 at least, the Christian neophyte has made profession of his faith that Christ was born of a virgin, since the baptismal creed has included a statement to that effect. If the Church has been so completely wrong and deceived in a question of fact (for such the statement in the creed has always been interpreted by the Church to be), and her official formula has all along been vitiated by the inclusion

of a false belief, there is no longer any certainty about any single article of her faith. The Germans are right ; and there is no longer the slightest reason for supposing that Jesus was God at all. The Church is guilty of formal error in one article of the creed : then there is no particular value attaching any longer to the creed as such, there is no single part of the Church's message in which she may not be equally at fault. Her knowledge has been proved ignorance. Put not your trust in her.

So the first class of people would say. Either the Virgin Birth is true because the inspired teaching Church so proclaims ; and in that case there is no need to waste labour on investigating the historical evidence and the philosophical probabilities of the matter. Or it is untrue ; and in that case the message we have received from Jesus is no true message, but a gospel contrived and published by men ; and Christianity falls to the ground. So again it is not worth haggling over evidence of things alleged to be divine, when they have been proved to be but human after all, and no more divine than any ordinary statement of a fact of common observation. In a word, the Church, if she is really commissioned to teach, has staked all her teaching authority on the truth of the Virgin Birth by asserting it in her creed, and there the matter ends.

To such as these I venture to offer the reflections contained in the following pages, not for one moment with any desire to shift them from the very strong ground which in my opinion they have occupied, but because I believe it to be important that the faith, and also the inspired authority on which the faith is based, should be rationally presented and rationally understood. Mankind has been endowed with intellect for the grasp of spiritual matters as much as for guidance in practical affairs ; and although reason may be a less important gift of God than a devoted loving faith in Him, yet it also is a gift from heaven. It is no derogation from the dignity of simple faith in the divine love that we should try so far as lies in our human capacity to understand it also. Reason as well as faith has an affinity with the supernatural, if it is properly employed.

The other class to which I have referred does not believe in the inspired teaching commission of the Church. It holds that such inspiration as the Church may possess does not

relate to history and the records of the great things God has done for us, but to the future evolution, both in theory and in practice, of a true expression of the relations between God and man and the universe. The Church, in fact, is not inspired to preserve a given tradition, but to discard ideas and expressions of ideas as and when they have become outworn. The interest of this class is not primarily soteriological but ethical and cosmological, like that of the second century Gnostics, who made the same claim as these modern speculators, and were at that time disallowed in their claim by the Church. They do not hold that truth lies from of old with the Church, and that all who seek the truth must seek to the Church in order to find it revealed : but that truth lies in the thinking world, and that if the Church is to maintain her relative standard of truth, she must seek to the thinking world and correct her dogmas by reference to its current speculative achievements, in the hope that at the last day speculation may have so far progressed as to arrive at absolute certainty. Meantime truth is relative or symbolic : there is no such thing as certainty, and the formula of one age may be wholly discarded by the next. Creeds are not to be regarded as fixed criteria of truth and error, but as the focus of discussion and controversy and speculation.

To such as these last I commend my book with quite a different purpose, and in very different words. I would ask them first of all not to prejudge the question at issue, but to disarm themselves of any intellectual prepossessions they may have acquired upon the subject. I would remind them that advance in scientific knowledge only opens wider the door through which we look upon processes : it throws no light upon ultimate causes. And if the ultimate cause of an event were allowed to be different from those ordinarily operative, we might well expect to see the difference reflected in the ensuing process. Christ if he was Incarnate God was supernatural : he altogether breaks the natural order and transcends our ordinary experience, unless he was nothing more than an ordinary man. Is it so much to ask therefore that my "benevolent reader" may be prepared, if he finds the evidence so draws him, to grant that the processes of his birth in some respects may have transcended the processes of ordinary observation ?

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THE VIRGIN BIRTH OF OUR LORD

I

THE AUTHORITY OF LUKE

IN proceeding to investigate our subject the first witness to be interrogated is Saint Luke. Some details of his life are more or less familiar. He was a prominent and intimate companion of Saint Paul, possibly his medical attendant, certainly his devoted friend. He has left two works behind him, of the authorship of which there is no reasonable doubt. They are both incorporated in the Bible, one being the gospel which bears his name, and the other being that continuation of the gospel story which is known as "Acts" or "Acts of the Apostles."

The date of these two books has not been determined with absolute consent. It is sometimes thought that they were published in the decade that followed the destruction of Jerusalem, that is, some time between A.D. 70 and 80. The serious reasons alleged for this belief amount to three. It has been said that the books contain theological terms which would seem to indicate a more considerable development than is shown by the contents of Matthew and Mark. But even allowing this to be the case, and it is very far from certain, we find in Luke and Acts much less development of theological expression than in the Pauline epistles: yet those epistles, excluding the Pastorals which are quite unnecessary for our present argument, were all written nine or more years before the conquest of Jerusalem. Secondly, it has been thought that a date before A.D. 70 would not give time for the "many" attempts at Christian writings mentioned in the preface to Luke. This objection is quite

arbitrary. Apparently at least three previous documents were used by Saint Luke as sources for his gospel, and we know that the first gospel was composed roughly about the same time: obviously the whole period before and up to the publication of Luke was one of considerable literary activity on the part of Christians, and there is no reason, as Professor Harnack well says,¹ to tie ourselves down to any one decade in trying to fix this period. In the judgment of the present writer the supposed source "Q" was probably written before A.D. 50, and any decade after that will suit. The third serious argument for a comparatively late date is the alleged *vaticinium post eventum* of the prophecy relating to the fall of Jerusalem. The utter hollowness of this suggestion is exposed in admirable fashion by Professor Harnack,² who has further shown adequate reason to suppose that Acts, the later of the two Lucan writings, was given to the world about the year A.D. 60 or 61. The gospel therefore, if Professor Harnack's reasoning be accepted, cannot be dated later than that time and may be a year or two earlier. The obvious opportunity for its author to have collected material and to have compiled the work was in the two years during which his leader suffered detention at Cæsarea, under the procurator Antonius Felix. That brings us to a date about A.D. 56-58, and it must be admitted that far stronger positive reasons can be adduced in favour of such a date than for a later one.

But in any case, whether the Third Gospel belongs to the end of the sixth or to the seventh decade of the Christian era, or even (which may be regarded as quite improbable) to the eighth, a further fact about it of the highest importance for the present discussion must now be considered as proved and unquestionable. It used to be argued that the first two chapters, containing the account of the Nativity, were a later addition to the work, prefixed by an editorial hand at some date subsequent to the Lucan autograph. There was no shred of textual or other external evidence in support of this theory, but evidence is not always the first thing that a theorist requires to work on. But it has now been established beyond the

¹ *Date of Acts and Synoptic Gospels*, E.T., 1911, p. 125, note.

² *Op. cit.*, pp. 119 seqq.

possibility of reasonable doubt that these two chapters were written down by the author of the rest. The proof of this is drawn with no uncertain hand by Professors Harnack and Stanton, from a close investigation of the minute details of literary style displayed in these chapters and the whole of the rest of Saint Luke's writings. Prof. Harnack's conviction of the unity of authorship is so intense as to persuade him that the two chapters were probably composed by Saint Luke without reliance upon any written source¹: he even thought at one time (whether he thinks so still or not) that the hymns Magnificat and Benedictus are of the author's own composition, the poetic effusion of the beloved physician's pen. Prof. Stanton, however, as the result of a much closer and broader analysis, proves that this opinion is quite unfounded; he considers that for the most part of their course the two chapters betray no more of Saint Luke's own handiwork than may be noticed on the average in any passage where we have an opportunity of comparing his gospel with the text of his source.²

The belief is dead and may profitably be ignored that chapters i and ii of Saint Luke's gospel were written by a later editor. But further doubt has been cast upon the authenticity of verses 34 and 35 of chapter i. Although in other verses commentators generally have seemed to read allusions to the doctrine, yet these two form the only passage of the gospel in which explicit mention is made of the miraculous conception. Can it be that they are an interpolation, by which a brilliant mythologist has gathered to a head the various suggestive misinterpretations current in his day of those other verses in the narrative? Has some such perverse mind taken advantage of the ambiguities in a previously innocent description, and by a single stroke of genius befooled the superstitious instinct of subsequent generations into a falsely credulous interpretation of the whole account of Jesus' birth and infancy?

The question is at first sight complicated by the fact that one Latin manuscript³ omits verse 34, "And Mary

¹ *Luke the Physician*, E.T., pp. 215 seqq.

² *The Gospels as Historical Documents*, Part II, pp. 223 seqq., 291 seqq.

³ "b" (Cod. Veron.) Cent. IV or V.

said to the angel, How shall this be seeing that I know not a man? ” This appears to add some bias of external authority in favour of the theory of interpolation. But the same manuscript transposes into the place of verse 34 the first portion of verse 38, thus condemning its inaccuracy out of its own mouth. The probable explanation of the error is that the scribe’s eye passed from the words “Dixit autem Maria ” at verse 34 to the same words at verse 38, and mechanically, he wrote “Ecce ancilla Domini, fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum,” omitting the intervening lines of the manuscript from which he was copying. Omission, especially in this way, of lines or sentences or columns is of the commonest occurrence in every manuscript, good and bad. However in this case, as not infrequently happens, somebody perceived the mistake and inserted most of the missing words. He omitted the question of Mary to the angel, as through the error an answer had been already put into her mouth which signified her unquestioning acceptance of the revelation ; and when he arrived at verse 38 he left out the first half of the verse for the simple reason that he had it already in his text a few lines higher up.¹

Be this the correct explanation or not, no serious critic lays any stress upon the absence of the single verse 34 in this one manuscript. In the first place, the value of the manuscript itself would not warrant it. It is not an important witness, but a second-rate manuscript of an Old Latin version, and it stands absolutely unsupported by any other manuscript either of the Greek text or of any version. Further, it contains other interesting variants, in reading which it again stands isolated ;² and as it happens these readings disprove with crushing force any argument that has been raised in the hope of showing that the writer of the manuscript had grounds for disbelieving the story of the virginal conception of Christ. For in the gospel of Saint John, chapter i, verse 13, this interesting manuscript reads, “qui non ex sanguinibus neque ex voluntate carnis neque ex voluntate viri sed ex Deo natus est,” instead of the usual “nati sunt,” transferring to Jesus Christ the statement

¹ For fuller discussion see Thorburn, *The Doctrine of the Virgin Birth*, pp. 52 seqq.

² See appended note.

which in other texts refers to the spiritual re-birth of His followers. But thus applied to their Master the words can only bear one meaning, in view of the belief universally current, that He was miraculously conceived without the agency of a human father. And in Matthew i. 16 this manuscript is unique in the care displayed to avoid attributing Christ's paternity to Saint Joseph.¹

But the testimony of this lonely codex can be safely disregarded on other grounds. It omits indeed verse 34; but it includes verses 35-37. Why should the angel make the astounding statement that the Holy Ghost should come upon our Lady, unless his prophecy related to a virginal conception? If all that was about to happen was that her Child, conceived in ordinary human wedlock, should be called holy, and even prove to be Messiah, why did not Gabriel state simply that the Holy Ghost should come upon the Child? What need could arise for the power of the Most High to overshadow Mary? And further, if Gabriel had not been foretelling that a miracle would come to pass in the case of the mother of our Lord, why did he proceed to clinch his argument by referring to a miracle already brought about on behalf of her cousin Elizabeth? "And behold thy cousin also hath conceived in her old age, and this is the sixth month with her that was called barren. For no word from God shall be impossible." This was a statement capable of verification, and Mary shortly afterwards visited her kinswoman and verified it. But what in the world was the fact intended to corroborate except that another miracle would come to pass for Mary herself? And as the Blessed Virgin was not in her old age and was not called barren (no one has yet advanced this hypothesis), the miracle foretold by the angel in verses 35-37 can only have been of the description implied by the contents of verse 34.

It is entirely beside the point to urge that an earlier and better tradition is embodied in the readings of certain versions which refer to Mary in verse 5 of chapter ii as the wife rather than as the betrothed of Saint Joseph. Apart from the fact that this reading is only found in two Latin manuscripts and the Sinaitic Syriac version, the term wife

¹ See Chapter III, The "Western" Readings, p. 32.

is one which obviously might be substituted in a version for the more accurate but more cumbrous expression of the original. The ordinary Latin reading is "desponsata sibi uxore"; nothing would be easier than for the first two words to be omitted as a measure of practical convenience by a copyist, if not by a translator. The evangelist himself is perfectly ready to refer briefly to Saint Joseph as the father of our Lord. He does so five times in chapter ii, at verses 27, 33, 41, 43, and 48. These verses are undoubtedly part of the record furnished by Saint Luke: his feelings were not harrowed in the least by this convenient avoidance of periphrasis. Yet Saint Luke himself in chapter iii, verse 23, calls Jesus "the son, as was supposed, of Joseph"; he himself obviously believed in the Virgin Birth.

It may indeed be said, without the slightest fear of contradiction, that the author of the third gospel, universally assumed to be Saint Luke, assented without qualification to the belief that Christ was born of a virgin. This is admitted, for instance, by Prof. Harnack, who, however far he is himself from putting any credence in that doctrine, yet is sufficient of a critic and historian to perceive the plain fact about Saint Luke's belief. Speaking of Luke i, ii, and iii. 23-38 (the genealogy), he says, "It is certain that these passages ought not (as with Marcion) to be eliminated from the third gospel."¹ He seeks indeed to show that the doctrine of the Virgin Birth was false to the facts, that it was a "new view": about this there will be something to be said later. But for the present purely critical question we can quote the authority of the great German critic on our side. He writes, "The new view was . . . a logical conclusion from the belief that our Lord was God's Son by the operation of the Holy Spirit. Now, it of course seems certain that Saint Paul never even thought of the Virgin Birth, but it is not thereby proved that this 'working hypothesis' of the Faith had not already made its appearance in some Christian communities of the time of Saint Paul."² Again, "neither the *γεννηθεὶς ἐκ πνεύματος ἁγίου* nor the Virgin Birth compel us to assume an advanced period in the development of Christian doctrine; on the

¹ *Date of Acts and Synoptic Gospels*, p. 141 (note). ² *Ib.* p. 144.

contrary, these ideas . . . are primitive in themselves, and are declared to be primitive by the fact that at the end of the first century, or at least the beginning of the second century, they were the *common property* of Christians.

. . . But every belief which at that time was the common property of Christians (including the Palestinian churches) must be traced back to the churches of Palestine, and must be ascribed to the first decades after the Resurrection.”¹

Some further remarks of Prof. Harnack may be cited. In these chapters, he points out, “St. Mary is thrust into the foreground . . . indeed from ii. 19, 51 it follows that the stories are intended to be regarded as derived in the last instance from St. Mary herself.” He hints at very free treatment by unknown hands (if the stories ever did come from the mother of Christ) before they reached Saint Luke : he seems to suggest that they may then have come to Saint Luke, with the miraculous element embedded in the course of oral tradition ; he certainly supposes that Saint Luke recast the language of them. But he is equally positive that the evangelist did not himself invent any feature of them ; they must have come to him as a whole, claiming the authority of Mary, “and therefore certainly from Palestine.” There can be no doubt “that Saint Luke regarded them as proceeding from Saint Mary ; for his practice as an historian proves that he could not have himself invented a fiction like this.”² It is worth while to pause upon the last sentence, and consider what was the practice of Saint Luke, and how far his claim is justified to the title of an accurate historian. It is possible to check him by analysing his treatment of the source which has come down to us substantially unaltered, that is the gospel of Saint Mark, and by comparing his statements upon certain points with the information that has been compiled from a study of archaeology. Something can also be gained by noticing the character of the claims which he himself makes for his history, and by determining so far as may be the use he made of the opportunities afforded him for gathering authentic information. Such an important witness as Saint Luke is, deserves to have his credentials very thoughtfully considered.

Ib. p. 148.

² Ib. p. 155.

It would require a separate volume to enter upon a discussion of these points in any detail, and we must confine our inquiry to broad outlines. In the first place, the evangelist's method varies somewhat in regard to the closeness with which he follows the original of Mark. But it is most remarkable that his variations from the source are far less frequent in reporting speech than in describing incidents. This can be seen by anybody who takes the trouble (no slight one, but most instructive) to underline the text of Luke in all those passages which are derived from Mark. Large blocks of Christ's teaching are reported almost word for word, and separate sayings embedded in a mass of narrative are also faithfully recorded; while the narrative is handled freely, rather as the basis of Saint Luke's own account than as a model to be slavishly transcribed. The sole important exception to the general rule is in the apocalyptic discourse delivered at the end of Christ's ministry, and given in chapter xiii of Mark. But here there is reason to think that Saint Luke relied to some considerable extent on independent testimony accorded him in the course of his researches. That is certainly true of the rest of the gospel from this place onwards; and it is only reasonable to suppose his information extended to the subject of the discourse as well as to the narrative that follows it.¹

One may go farther and assert that there is no evidence whatever of any deliberate bias or misrepresentation in his treatment of Mark. Nor does he show a tendency to make clumsy misunderstandings. He is intelligent as well as honest. His characteristics are admirably summarized by Prof. Stanton. "While adhering closely on the whole to Mark's narrative, Luke seems here and there to have drawn inferences from what he read, to have formed his own idea of the circumstances and incidents, and then to have told the facts as he conceived them. Or again the special interest which he felt in the subject-matter, and the belief that he could improve the presentation of

¹ Other exceptions occur (*a*) when Saint Luke obviously had further detailed information, e.g. viii. 45 and 46 (cf. the mention of Peter), (*b*) in reporting a parable, which partakes of the nature of narrative, e.g. xx. 9 seqq.

it, have moved him to add various touches or to rearrange the account. Or, once more, some little piece of additional information which he possessed, or a different mode of telling a story to which he had become accustomed, has exercised an influence upon him. Sentences in which Luke shows more than his average amount of independence of the form of Mark's narrative, owing to one or other of the causes just mentioned, occur especially at the beginnings of sections, or at the conclusions, where, for instance, he depicts the effects of a miracle; but sometimes also in other parts."¹ Let this be taken in conjunction with what we have already observed to be his habit in the case of sayings and speeches, and there will be found nothing which would be to the dishonour of any historian, but rather what enhances our opinion of his individuality and capacity.

The importance of this conclusion cannot well be overestimated. If Saint Luke made a good and intelligent use of the Marcan narrative, it is probable that he made a similar use of the narrative, whether oral or, as is more likely, written, on which he based his first two chapters. And if, while treating narrative freely in order to make it all the more his own, he yet records speeches with commendable accuracy, there is all reasonable ground for believing that he faithfully transcribed the words of Gabriel and Mary, in which explicit mention is made of her virginity.

In the second place we may turn to archaeological discoveries in support of the evangelist's statements, and the result once more is striking. It is impossible to give from isolated instances even a faint idea of the comprehensive force with which conviction in the trustworthiness of Saint Luke is induced by a study of archaeological considerations. Readers must be referred to the works of Sir William Ramsay² for details of "the accurate knowledge of localities and institutions"³ shown by the author of this gospel in

¹ Op. cit. pp. 278 seqq.

² In particular, *The Church in the Roman Empire, St. Paul the Traveller and Roman Citizen, Was Christ born at Bethlehem?* and an important new book published in 1915 under the title, *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament.*

³ Stanton, op. cit. p. 260.

such instances as we are able to confirm. Suffice it to say that what used to be thought errors incapable of defence except by the most reactionary obscurantist now prove to be correct observations of plain fact. The real error has been confounded by the evidence of hard stone and dry paper.

The bearing of this last point on the question of the Virgin Birth needs little exposition. Saint Luke has now been ascertained, at all points where he has been found capable of being tested, to be a careful and an accurate observer. He displays an almost unnecessary desire for curious and meticulous accuracy. Further, this accuracy is not confined to Acts, but extends so far as can be discovered to the historical and chronological statements contained in Luke ii. 1-5, which used to be dismissed without argument as fiction. This affords a presumption that in chapters i and ii generally he was at least not so uncritical as it has been alleged ; that in fact when he committed them to writing he felt deeply responsible for the truth of what he said.

Finally it remains to consider his own claims and to see how far we can say that they are justified in practice. This again is enough to provide material for a volume, and a general reference must be made to the works of other writers. In summary however it is true to say that at the beginning of Acts Saint Luke claims to be an historian, and in the preface to his gospel he claims to be a scientific historian. Implicitly the same claim is everywhere invoked, and it is no small one to put forward : for if ancient historical science failed to reach modern standards, at any rate it had produced quite good historians in Greek before Saint Luke. Did the evangelist then have access to authorities oral and written, whose excellence would afford a reasonable ground for making such a claim ?

In the gospel his main sources were apparently two, a document practically identical with Mark, and a book of anecdotes and teaching, (also used by the author of the First Gospel and fairly widely quoted in all probability by Saint James in his epistle), which came to Saint Luke with the authority of the Palestinian church and possibly with that of the Apostle Matthew. To these he applied

a strictly historical treatment. It is worth noticing, as it has an important bearing on Acts too, that Saint Luke definitely had met Saint Mark before the end of Saint Paul's first imprisonment at Rome.¹ Apparently he used a separate authority for chapters i and ii, which need not for the moment be discussed. The source or sources of much of his peculiar matter (especially of certain parables) cannot be traced; but it is generally agreed that in the Passion narrative he used good oral authority: this may or may not have been in part connected with Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, or with Manaen the foster-brother of the tetrarch.² With regard to the gospel then we can only say that its sources can be indicated for the most part, and they are unexceptionable: where it is not possible to trace them, the evangelist at least had full access to the living stream of Palestinian tradition.

But a study of Acts enables us to speak with more confidence. The contents of the book may be divided for analysis into what relates directly to Saint Paul and what does not. There is no need to seek for authority on behalf of the former portion, especially since Saint Luke himself was eye-witness and auditor of most of the events which it contains. The latter portion may be divided again into two parts, what relates to Jerusalem and what does not. Now between Jerusalem the religious capital and Caesarea the political capital of the country there was constant and rapid communication; and in Jerusalem, besides the old-established Christian families like that of Saint Mark and Saint Barnabas,³ was James the bishop and "brother" of the Lord:⁴ he could supply or he could verify tradition, as far back at least as the Resurrection.⁵ In addition, Saint Luke might have had information about events in Jerusalem from Philip the Deacon, Silas,⁶ and others; or from Saint Peter during his visit to Antioch.⁷ But how far can

¹ Col. iv. 10, 14.

² Cf. Luke viii. 3, xxiv. 10, Acts xiii. 1. Luke's peculiar matter shows considerable interest in the Herods and acquaintance with their affairs, e.g. especially Luke iii. 19, ix. 9, xiii. 31-33, xix. 12-28, xxiii. 6-12, Acts xii. 18-23, in addition to the previous references.

³ Acts xii. 12, Col. iv. 10, cf. Acts iv. 36-37.

⁴ Acts xxi. 18.

⁵ Cf. Acts i. 14 and 1 Cor. xv. 7.

⁶ Acts xv. 22.

⁷ Gal. ii. 11.

we trace the source of narratives relating to events outside Jerusalem? A short analysis will show that all this section of Acts could have been obtained by Saint Luke without stirring foot outside Caesarea. The passages in question are chapter viii. 4-40, chapter ix. 32-x. 48, and chapter xii. 20-23.¹ Now chapter viii. 4-40 contains the experiences of Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven, who lived at Caesarea at the time when Saint Luke and Saint Paul were for two years detained there.² Chapter xii. 20-23 describes the end of Herod Agrippa I, which took place in the same city. Chapter x. 1-48 supplies the history of Cornelius, a resident at the time of his conversion in this same town of Caesarea in which Saint Luke spent two years. The remaining part of this section, chapter ix. 32-fin, does not comprise a separate history, but provides the beginning of the same story. It introduces the circumstance of Saint Peter's visit; and the only details given of the Apostle's tour before the entry of Cornelius upon the scene relate to events of some notoriety³ which happened in the towns of Lydda and Joppa, situated on a main road between Jerusalem and the sea. These events would become known in three ways. The report of them would reach Jerusalem, which heard so promptly how Saint Peter ate in a Gentile house at Caesarea.⁴ The messengers of Cornelius slept a night in the same house as the Apostle at Joppa.⁵ And when the Saint returned to the holy city no doubt he and his six⁶ companions reported what he had done in the other places besides Caesarea which they had visited.

It was necessary to go carefully into this subject because we are able to arrive at a more decisive result in Acts than in the gospel. The conviction forced upon us briefly is that in Acts Saint Luke not only used the highest authorities, but used them exclusively. There being no positive evidence that he acted otherwise in the gospel, for the

¹ xi. 20-24 explains why Barnabas fetched Paul from Tarsus, and leads up to that event; xviii. 24-28, read in the light of 1 Cor. iii, clearly bears upon the later controversy of Saint Paul with those who misused the name of Apollos: thus they both may fairly be said to relate directly to Saint Paul.

² Acts xxi. 8, cf viii. 40.

⁴ Acts xi. init.

⁶ Acts xi. 12.

³ Acts ix. 35, 42.

⁵ Acts x. 23.

indications are that he did not, we may infer with considerable probability that any statement of which Saint Luke is the author comes from a source of the highest authority, with the added guarantee of its acceptance by a singularly keen and accurate intelligence.

Prof. Ramsay's conclusion is in complete agreement with this. He writes as follows: "No writer is correct by mere chance, or accurate sporadically. He is accurate by virtue of a certain habit of mind. . . . It is not a permissible view that a writer is accurate occasionally, and inaccurate in other parts of his book. Each has his own standard and measure of work, which is produced by his moral and intellectual character." "The question among scholars now is with regard to Luke's credibility as an historian; it is generally conceded that he wrote at a comparatively early date, and had authorities of high character. . . . How far can we believe his narrative? The present writer takes the view that Luke's history is unsurpassed in respect of its trustworthiness."¹ Elsewhere he speaks if possible more strongly. After discussing the question of the Birth at Bethlehem he writes, "Not merely are all the statements in Luke ii. 1-3 true. They are also in themselves great statements, presenting to us large historical facts, world-wide administrative measures, vast forces working on human society through the ages. . . . This is not the fancy of some commonplace inventor of pseudo-romantic fiction, as the episode has been pronounced by critics to be. It is the view of history as history is conceived by a true historian, who can look into the heart of things, and who thinks on a grand scale."²

Postponing for a moment the consideration of the question whether such an historian could have been completely deceived upon such an important and remarkable topic as the Birth of Christ, when he had access to the most authoritative living opinion, we will be content for the moment to return to chapters i and ii of the gospel. Prof. Harnack has already given us an indication of the source from which they may be supposed to have been derived. It is clear that ultimately the story can pretend to

¹ *Bearing of Recent Discovery*, pp. 80, 81.

² *Ib.* p. 304.

have proceeded only from the blessed Virgin. As every commentator observes, and justly, it is told throughout from her point of view. It belongs entirely to her; her revelation, her feelings, her kinsfolk, her humble and triumphant wonder, fill the page. Now it seems far more probable that Saint Luke copied it from a previous document than that he was the first to write it down. There are certain positive elements of style which would suggest a documentary source rather than oral tradition, for they are quite unlike Saint Luke's own work.¹ Again the whole tone of the chapters is distinctly Hebraic: the parallelism of the narrative, and the sometimes unexplained references to Jewish customs and ideas, as well as the almost equal prominence conferred upon Saint John Baptist, would all go to indicate the same fact; and the subtler evidence of literary feeling pronounces for a Jewish authorship. There are indeed undoubtedly places at which Saint Luke's own masterly Hellenistic style can be detected, more particularly at the beginning of chapter ii; but the contrast thus created only emphasizes the conclusion that in the main he is following a written source.

This document, assuming it to have been such, we have seen from its contents must have come to Saint Luke with the implied authority of Christ's mother. Saint Luke, a real and great historian, accepted that authority and upon it founded his account of the birth of Christ. If he was right in doing so, his first two chapters contain in the last resort the testimony of the only person who by no possibility could have been deceived. But there is still the necessity to estimate the possibility of his having been wrong. Deliberate fraud is out of the question. But could Saint Luke have made a mistake?

He might perhaps if he had been credulous, but the whole of the preceding argument shows that he was not. He had not even a disposition to record miracles for their own sake: there are not many recorded in his peculiar matter where his narrative is not paralleled by Matthew or Saint Mark, and he omits the rather striking miracle of the cursing of the barren fig-tree,² as well as that section of Mark

¹ See e.g. Stanton, *op. cit.* pp. 294 and 295.

² Mark xi. 12 seqq. 20 seqq.

which contains the walking on the water, the healing of the Syrophoenician girl, the curing of the deaf and dumb man, the feeding of the four thousand, and the restoration to sight of the blind man at Bethsaida.¹ Again in Acts he misses an obvious chance of making out that Saint Paul miraculously came to life again after being stoned at Lystra.² The temper of his mind was not so much credulous as sceptical. This may be illustrated by a small point of a kind not exemplified hitherto. Mark xv. 39, followed by Matthew xxvii. 54, makes the centurion at the cross say, "Truly this man was God's Son." Saint Luke, instead of dwelling on the miracle of the centurion's conversion, as he might, coldly alters "God's Son" to "righteous."³ He was aware of the Hebrew idiom, "son of" meaning "like," and thinking it likely that his sources had somewhere confused the sense of the centurion's words, he wrote what he concluded on critical grounds to be the centurion's real utterance. Curiously enough in this case Saint Luke was wrong, as the words "Son of God" must have been called forth by the opening of our Lord's own Seventh Word, "Father, into Thy hands I commend My spirit," recorded immediately before; but the alteration nicely illustrates the character of the evangelist's mind, trained, as Greek medical men were trained, scientifically. Whatever else Saint Luke was, he was not credulous.

Then it is impossible to conceive that Saint Luke could have received a document, or for the matter of that an oral narrative, which on the face of it could only claim to have been derived from Christ's own mother, without inquiry, investigation, and authentication. It is really not easy to conceive of any primitive believer of any standing doing so, so restrained and sober is the picture that is drawn of such in the New Testament; but that Saint Luke should, is absurd. And the document or story in question was so easily to be investigated; there were so many of our Lord's contemporaries still alive, so many of his own apostles and even of his own family accessible, to whom the narrative could be submitted. The man who wrote the

¹ Mark vi. 45 to viii. 26.

² Acts xiv. 19, 20.

³ Luke xxiii. 47.

Lucan preface alone and nothing more could not have failed to ask for a guarantee to be given with the information when he had the means of following up the history of the tale and checking it back to the closest proximity of its origin ; and it was not possible at that date to investigate a Christian narrative at all without being satisfied in a very few stages either that it had its source in an unauthenticated "some one says" or that it really was derived on good authority from responsible testimony on which reliance could be placed. This is obviously true if the date of the gospel is fixed, as it almost certainly should be, at the end of the sixth decade ; but it is still true if the gospel was not written till twenty years later, beyond which date no reasonable conjecture can project it. In the last decade of the century there were still some alive who had known Christ in the flesh : for Papias mentions that he had spoken with certain of our Lord's disciples, while implying that at that date most at least of the apostles were dead ;¹ and Irenaeus asserts that his own master Polycarp (martyred about A.D. 155) had been a personal disciple of Saint John the apostle and of others who had seen the Lord.² And grandsons of Jude the Lord's "brother" were certainly alive in the reign of Domitian.³

Saint Luke then had the means of verifying his authorities and of tracing the origin of his information to a creditable source before he inserted it in his biography. And this is just what in his preface he claims to have done. "Since many have attempted to draw up a narrative of the events consummated among us, on the lines of the tradition handed down to us by the original eye-witnesses and ministers of the word, I also decided to trace them all accurately back to the source and write them for you consecutively." He traced the source of his information and checked it by the testimony of the eye-witnesses and actors in the drama. No one could need more or demand more from him than this.

It has, however, been argued that Mary could not have been herself aware of any miraculous circumstances atten-

¹ *Ap. Euseb. H.E. iii. 39.*

² *Iren. frag. 2, etc., ed. Harvey.*

³ *Hegesippus, ap. Eus. H.E. iii. 20.*

dant upon the birth of her Son, owing to the attitude she is alleged to have taken upon a memorable occasion recorded by Saint Mark. In chapter iii, verse 21, that evangelist tells us that when Jesus' "family"¹ heard of the crowds attracted by His teaching "they went out to lay hold on Him : for they said, He is beside Himself." A little later, in verses 31 and following, we read that "there come His mother and His brethren" to the house in which He was, and sent a message to Him as He sat teaching, which provoked the reply that whosoever should do the will of God, the same was His brother and sister and mother. If Mary thought Him mad because He drew a crowd to hear Him, how could she be conscious all the time of a supernatural origin such as Saint Luke attributes to Him, with its promise for Him of greatness and a kingdom and the throne of David, not to mention the assurance of His divine sonship?

On examination this argument will prove to be trivial, but it is worth while sometimes to expose one triviality as an example of the rest. There is nothing in the text to show that Mary thought our Lord beside Himself on this occasion : that error was reserved for His "family" or "friends,"² and it is not absolutely certain that they are to be identified with His mother and brethren. Between the mention of the latter and the former Saint Mark interposes a whole section dealing with the accusation of the scribes that Christ's miracles were wrought through possession by Beelzebub. But it may be granted that the identification is quite probably justified, so far as concerns the "brethren" of our Lord. Yet the very vague and exceptional character of the phrase used to denote "family" makes it unlikely that such a precise meaning as "His mother and brethren" is intended to be put upon it. If the writer had meant precisely them he would have named them, as he does below. But in fact the expression used would include all the circle of our Lord's connexions and acquaintance : the general opinion was that He was mad, and no doubt His unbelieving "brethren" voiced the general counsel if they offered to go and put restraint upon Him. Such

¹ *Oi παρ' αὐτοῦ* in the original.

² So translated in R.V.

popularity as Christ was enjoying was dangerous ; it was liable to have political consequences.¹ His mother, who followed Him from Galilee to the foot of the cross, ministering to His comfort, would have been strangely behindhand now if she had failed to try and mitigate the threatened violence of His well-meaning relatives ; so she followed with them to prevent them taking any harmful steps, to act as peacemaker to their more sober reflections, perhaps to beg her Son for a greater show of caution. For in so far as His words in answer to their message contain a rebuke, and not a simple lesson for the bystanders whom He was teaching, they imply a rebuke not for unbelief but for interference with the course of the divine will. He did not say on this occasion, that "whosoever shall believe on Me is My mother and My brother," but that "whosoever shall do the will of God, the same is My brother and sister and mother." Mary in answer to her anxiety was tenderly reminded, as she was on at least two other occasions,² that whatever He might do or not do, His action was governed and ordered by the will of His Father.

A comparison of these two other incidents shows that want of faith in His divinity is not the error corrected. The first³ forms part of the Narrative of Christ's Infancy, continuous with the story of the Annunciation, and clearly refers back to that event in the correction made by Jesus in the denotation of the term His "father" : in the second⁴ Mary appeals to Christ to rectify the lack of wine, with an obvious faith in His power to overcome obstacles by means which others were precluded from exercising.

The argument then that Mary's conduct on this occasion is unlike that to be expected of one whose memory enshrined so wonderful and intimate a secret as that of the Virgin Birth, cannot be sustained ; and there is nothing to prevent us concluding that Saint Luke's careful and critical methods,

¹ Cf. John vi. 15.

² Luke ii. 49, John ii. 4.

³ Luke ii. 48-49. Verses 50-51 state that in view of the principle he laid down Mary and Joseph felt the problem of their responsibility for His safety to be a very difficult one : however He solved it in practice by going home with them and being subject to them.

⁴ John ii. 3-5.

revealed by a thorough study of his whole surviving work, led him to select and verify the sources of his information no less accurately for the contents of his first two chapters than for the remainder of the gospel and Acts. If then we may assume that his account was derived from the Virgin, and on the further assumption that he did not obtain it from her own lips or hand, three channels existed to our knowledge by which the information might have been transmitted. There was Saint John, who took Mary to his own home ; there was Saint James, at last converted by his " brother " the risen Lord ; and there was the little group of women who accompanied our Lord upon some of His journeys.¹ A statement committed to writing on behalf of her who kept all these things and pondered them in her heart might well have been kept with quiet reverence until in the divine providence it was guided into the hands of the man who alone was fully qualified to publish it ; and thus by the agency of Saint Paul's " beloved physician " the open secret, already long enjoyed by those in closest touch with the centre of Christian life and worship, be given at length without reticence as without blatancy to the multitude of the redeemed.

Nothing has happened since in the field of historical research to invalidate, and much has been discovered to support, the conclusions thus expressed some years ago by Dr. Sanday with regard to Saint Luke's authority for the Virgin Birth. " There is reason to think that Saint Luke used a special (written) source which may have been connected with the women mentioned below,² and through them with the Virgin Mary. The writer could not speak quite so confidently as Professor Ramsay as to the nearness of this source to the Virgin, but he does not think that it could be more than two or three degrees removed from her. It must have been near enough to retain the fine touches which Professor Ramsay so well brings out."³

NOTE ON THE READING IN JOHN i. 13.

This question is of high importance, and will be found to engage us again later. It is therefore only fair to admit that

¹ Luke viii. 2-3, xxiv. 10.

² The same as are referred to in the last note.

³ *Outlines of the Life of Christ*, 1905, p. 195 (note).

the "isolation" of cod. Veron. in respect of its reading in John i. 13 merely extends to manuscript authority. It actually is supported by the following Fathers:

Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons 177: wrote in Greek.

Hippolytus of Rome, martyred probably in 235 or 236: wrote in Greek.

Tertullian of Carthage, in a work composed after 200: wrote in Latin.

? Justin Martyr, another Greek writer, put to death at Rome between 163 and 167.

This array of authorities looks formidable, but in reality is far less so than it appears. Hippolytus was a pupil of Irenaeus, as we learn from a statement of Photius,¹ so he may be eliminated from the list of independent witnesses. Justin certainly alludes to the passage in Saint John, but it is doubtful from his allusion whether he actually read the singular. And if he did, there is an obvious connexion, apart from Rome, which links his testimony on to that of Irenaeus. Irenaeus came to the West from Ephesus at some time in the middle of the second century; while it was at Ephesus apparently, about the year 133, that Justin was converted to Christianity.

So far then we have tracked down the reading to Irenaeus, or alternatively to the text prevalent at Ephesus about A.D. 130-150. There remains Tertullian to account for. Now we know that Irenaeus was in close touch with events at Rome, and may have visited the city or even have lectured there after he was consecrated Bishop of Lyons. Tertullian also (one of the very few facts we know about him) had visited the city at some date before the end of the second century, and was very famous there indeed (Eusebius). Further, we know that Hippolytus during the two first decades of the third century, and possibly before, was in the enjoyment of great influence as a teacher in Rome; while the work (*De Carne Christi*) in which Tertullian quotes this reading was composed not earlier than the third century. And at any rate Tertullian affords weak evidence for the Old Latin text, since he is suspected of making, when he quotes, his own translation from Greek manuscripts. There seems from these facts to be no slight probability that Tertullian obtained his reading in one way or another either from Irenaeus or from Hippolytus.

The range of testimony is thus reduced to a single channel, and that not an Old Latin one but a Greek. What further makes it most unlikely that this reading is the true one is

¹ *D.C.B.*, vol. iii., p. 87, col. 2.

that we have contemporary evidence for the other. Tertullian strenuously assails the Valentinians for having perverted the text, on the ground that in this verse they read the plural. From this, together with the fact that only in *b* of all extant manuscripts does the singular reading survive, we may unhesitatingly infer that the plural was universally read outside the circle of influence above described, and that the singular was a corruption which probably arose at Ephesus in the time of Polycarp.

On the significance of the corruption, see further, pp. 70 and 71.

II

THE EVIDENCE OF MATTHEW

THE authorship of the first of our four gospels has commonly been ascribed to the Apostle Matthew. The ascription is probably mistaken, and throughout this essay it will be assumed to be erroneous ; but for convenience the name Matthew will be retained to denote both the book and its author, while the expression " Saint Matthew " will refer exclusively to the Apostle.

Matthew is very generally dated in the decade before the destruction of Jerusalem, and there is no reason to upset the accepted opinion. It was plainly written for a Palestinian audience, and therefore probably before A.D. 66, when the last troubles broke upon the holy land and city ; but as it draws very largely upon both " Q " and Mark it is not likely to have been composed much before A.D. 60. This result is confirmed by the apparent ignorance of one another's writings displayed both by Matthew and Saint Luke. After the catastrophe of A.D. 70 no doubt its true authorship was forgotten, or lost in obscurity : and since it embodied Palestinian tradition, and that tradition generally was hallowed by the name of Saint Matthew (who had, we know from Papias, composed a record in Aramaic), the name of the Apostle seems to have been attached to this gospel. The process may well have been facilitated if the source " Q," upon which this evangelist makes a large draft, was as seems probable a Greek translation of Saint Matthew's own work.

Statements of Matthew rest upon authority of a somewhat different character from that which gives such peculiar weight to the utterances of Saint Luke. As we have seen, the authority of Saint Luke's gospel is personal, and is determined by the individual character and ability of its composer. But the author of Matthew gives no such clear

and unassailable proofs of his personal character of mind, and such clues as may be drawn from a close study of his gospel would suggest that he was not a really great historian : his genius seems to have lain rather in seizing vivid but partial impressions of his subject, taken from different aspects, and depicting them in juxtaposition. This necessitated a systematic re-grouping of the subject-matter provided in his sources, which from their own point of view historians proper might think very reprehensible ; and he is consequently almost useless for determining the chronological sequence of instruction and events during the Galilean ministry. It was not the purpose of his work to elucidate that chronology.

Yet as a rule he follows the wording of his sources fairly closely ; he mingles and intertwines but does not often alter them in a matter of any importance. In the Passion narrative of necessity he also pursues the order of his main source, the gospel of Saint Mark : for the Passion is a subject which from its nature must be treated chronologically ; one cannot re-group the incidents of a single continuous episode without descending into fiction. Therefore although we do not possess the original source of Matthew's Birth and Infancy narrative, yet it is fairly safe to assume that he treated it much in the same way as he did the Passion story of Mark, and for the same reason, since it forms a continuous subject by itself. And therefore for that part at least of the gospel with which we are immediately concerned, the personal authority of Matthew, though not so striking and exceptional as that of Saint Luke, is yet not low.

But there is a further consideration for which allowance must be made. The First Gospel, unlike the rest, was not apparently published for the information of converts from abroad, but for the justification in its own and its neighbours' eyes of the Church of Palestine. The theme of the gospel is the Messianic drama, Christ's mission to the Jews, their national apostasy and the consequent universality of the Church which seemed to come into existence as a Jewish sect.¹ There is a general agreement among critics

¹ Cf. Saint Paul in Acts xxiv. 14, " after the Way which they call a sect, so serve I the God of our fathers."

that Matthew's appeal is to Jews. The immediate acceptance of the gospel by the Church of Palestine means that the Church of Palestine took upon itself in full degree the responsibility for the gospel. It is not for nothing that we find Matthew best known of all the gospels and most widely quoted in early times. It means that this gospel has behind it the authority of the Palestinian Church, and that upon the scattering of that Church in the seventh decade A.D. it was carried with the fugitives and disseminated far and wide. But the Church of Palestine was the only Church in which there can have been diffused a strong and general tradition about the facts of Christ's earthly life, or a tradition which was capable of being readily checked by a comparatively large body of well-informed and influential leaders.

Is it conceivable that this Church was deceived in the genuineness of its authorities for such a story as that of the supernatural birth of Christ, contained in the first two chapters of Matthew, or that it was led to set a higher value on them than they actually deserved? It is possible that Matthew's gospel was not published until after the death of Saint James the "brother" of the Lord, which took place in A.D. 62 or soon after. In that case the episcopal censorship of the publication could not have fallen to his hand. But, apart from the fact of the Church in Jerusalem having included from the first a number of Jewish converts of high social and intellectual standing,¹ which was in itself a sufficient guarantee against the acceptance of strange doctrines unsupported by adequate authority, the successor of Saint James was like himself a man in a peculiarly favourable position for knowing family details of the life of Jesus Christ. He was legally the Lord's cousin according to the flesh, being the nephew of Saint Joseph.² This is Symeon son of Clopas, who will be mentioned again later, of whose episcopate Hegesippus relates that it was characterized by freedom from all taint of unorthodoxy:³ so that he can hardly have himself condemned the doctrine of the Virgin Birth. Yet either under

¹ Cf. Acts vi. 7, 9 and 10.

² Hegesippus, *ap Eus. H.E.* iii. 11 and 32, iv. 22.

³ See ch. V, p. 75.

him or under Saint James the gospel of Matthew must have been published and disseminated. The inference is that he or Saint James assented to the contents of its first two chapters.

For the fact that censorship, official or otherwise, was exercised there is no need of evidence. Such persons as Saint James and Symeon must have contradicted new doctrines contrary to their own knowledge. Their contradiction of them could not be overlooked, and could not but be well known. We can see for instance how careful Saint James was to contradict a false impression which had got about concerning his teaching as to circumcision.¹ And that restriction was put upon the use of writings that purported to record the gospel history is as evident as it was necessary. A censorship of an unofficial character is revealed in the preface to Saint Luke's gospel, which censures by implication certain earlier writings in respect of fullness, accuracy, and consecutive treatment. But the chief proof is that so few writings have survived. The New Testament is a selection rather than a compilation: it was by means of criticism that the canon of scripture came to be determined.

There is an interesting case of the exercise of censorship of which the details are still recorded, dating from the end of the second century, but illuminating the methods by which the process might have been conducted in any age. Serapion, bishop of Antioch in Syria near the end of the second century A.D., after having granted the request of the Church of Rhossus to be allowed to read the "Gospel of Peter" in public, took occasion to borrow a copy and read that work for himself: whereupon he discovered its true nature, and wrote a letter deprecating certain features of it.² If the Christians of Rhossus appealed to their bishop for permission to read that book, which his letter admits to have been mostly orthodox, how much more would a Christian of Palestine have appealed for confirmation of the startling doctrine contained in Matthew's opening chapters, to the member of the Lord's own family who was presiding over the Church in the Holy Land. And if

¹ Acts xv. 24, 25.

² Preserved in *Eus. H.E.* vi. 12.

Serapion was so careful to peruse and guard against the errors of that so-called gospel, once his suspicions had become aroused concerning it, how much more would Saint James or Symeon have stopped the circulation of Matthew had they not had power to test and reason to approve its accuracy. We must conclude that the Palestinian Church accepted the canonical Matthew with the approbation of those who were in a position to judge the facts; and this constitutes an authority in favour of the historical truth of the Virgin Birth which is too high to be set aside.

Considering the contents of the first two chapters more in detail, it will be convenient for us at present to pass over the genealogy and peruse what remains. There are two distinct but connected stories before us, apparently derived from a single source: the first relates the conception and birth of the child Jesus, the second recounts the attitude of Herod, the temporal monarch of the Jewish nation, towards the infant Christ who was its spiritual King. In the latter portion of this double narrative (chapter ii) Saint Joseph is nowhere referred to as the father of Jesus; but five times the expression occurs "the Child and His mother,"¹ when we should naturally expect the writer to say "thy (his) Child" or "the Child and His parents." The inference to be drawn from the continual use of this unusual phrase is that the writer did not regard Saint Joseph as the father of the Child.

When we turn back to the beginning of the narrative (i. 18-25) this suspicion is found to be confirmed. The evangelist clearly states that while Saint Joseph and Mary were still betrothed and no more, the latter was found to be with child. Joseph, not knowing or being for the moment unable to credit any reason given for this, was thrown into a state of great anxiety and meditated putting her away. But in the night an angel appeared to him in a dream, and bade him set his fears at rest, for that which was conceived in her was not of human parentage, but of the Holy Ghost. He was at once convinced of the truth, and his anxiety, hitherto irrepressible, was dispelled. He

¹ To be more precise, this phrase occurs four times, and "the Child with Mary His mother" once (Matt. ii. 11).

therefore accepted his wife, so far as external observance went, and only so far. In due time she brought forth a Son, and he called His name Jesus, by this step implying that though he was not the parent he accepted the position of a father towards Him and acknowledged Him for legal purposes as if He were his own.

There are two slight textual variations in this passage which need mention, though they will require to be treated again later in connexion with certain other textual phenomena in verse 16 (part of the genealogy). In verse 25 the Sinaitic Syriac version omits "he knew her not until." In this it is supported by one Latin manuscript.¹ It also reads in the same verse "she bore *to him* a son," the words "to him" being an insertion otherwise without authority; and in verse 21 a similar insertion of "to thee" is made in the angelic pronouncement, this reading being supported by the Curetonian Syriac version.

The addition of the two "ethic datives" calls for no special explanation, as the insertion of ethic datives is a common feature of the Sinaitic version. Nor would it make the slightest difference to the sense if they really belonged to the original text of the gospel. In any case the angel is represented as saying "she shall bear a Son and *thou* shalt call His name Jesus": this implies that Saint Joseph was bidden to acknowledge her child as his own heir. For the like reason the omission in verse 25 need cause no one any uneasiness. It does not imply that Jesus was begotten by Saint Joseph, for the opposite is emphatically implied throughout the narrative; verses 18, 19, and 20, the prophecy cited in verses 22 and 23, and the statement in verse 24 that Saint Joseph's scruples were overcome, all make nonsense except upon the supposition that he had no part in the Child's conception. In fact the implication is quite different. The obvious motive which would induce a scribe or an editor to omit the words "he knew her not until," was that the sentence could be taken, in a sense which all tradition contradicted,² to mean that Saint Joseph had children by the Virgin subsequently.

¹ "k," Codex Bobiensis, a good manuscript of the African Old Latin version.

² Cf. note in Lightfoot, *Galatians*, p. 287.

to the birth of Christ. But there are several indications¹ which go to show that the translator of the Sinaitic Syriac version laid even more stress upon the virginity of Christ's mother than did the author of Matthew; he seems to harp upon the subject as if he held virginity in special honour. Taking this in connexion with the notorious sentiment in favour of virginity, and in particular with the belief in the perpetual virginity of Mary, which was universally prevalent in the Church, one may fairly attribute the omission of the clause in these two manuscripts to the offence which it might cause should it happen to be misunderstood.

These stories then on the face of them teach the doctrine of the Virgin Birth. But an attempt has been made to maintain that they should not be taken literally, but allegorically. We are asked to interpret the account of Saint Joseph's vision in some such way as this. Conception by the Holy Ghost is not to be thought inconsistent with conception by Saint Joseph. It is suggested that in the time of Christ Jewish thought held a child's parents responsible for the existence of its body, including its sensuous faculties, but that the soul was regarded as a spark of the divine reason, or an emanation from the Holy Spirit, and that its creation was considered to be quite independent of the procreation of the body to which it belonged. Applying this theory to the story before us, we should come to the following conclusions. Verse 18 is intended to convey merely that Mary owed the soul of her Child to the operation of the Holy Ghost. It is essential to the theory that we should emasculate verses 19 and 20, as being for the most part a clumsy gloss. After that process has been executed upon them, what remains will merely describe how an angel appeared to Saint Joseph and told him that the soul of the Messiah had been conceived in Mary by the Holy Ghost. Verse 21 contains the end of the angelic message. The prophecy of Isaiah quoted in verses 22 and 23 is to be taken in a sense germane to the theory. Verses 24 and 25 (minus the sentence omitted in Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Bobi-ensis) recount the subsequent natural generation of the Child's body by Saint Joseph and His birth in due course.

This speciously ingenious theory is unquestionably

¹ Collected by Dr. Gore, *Dissertations*, cheap edition, p. 295.

wrong, for the following decisive reasons. It will not, in spite of violent efforts made to force it, fit into the text. When we read in verse 18 that "*before they came together she was found with child,*" the meaning can only be that a body was already conceived in her womb: the Greek for "with child" is not the ordinary verb, which might perhaps with less fancifulness have been taken metaphorically; it is a phrase which means, translated literally, "containing in the belly." Further, the treatment meted out to verses 19 and 20 is arbitrary and uncritical in the extreme: there is neither evidence nor suspicion of evidence in favour of it. And the theory necessitates accepting in verse 25 the reading which is certainly the wrong one.

But that is not all. There is no reason to suppose that Matthew had ever even heard of any such theory of procreation. In fact no evidence can be produced that any Palestinian Jew held such a theory. It comes from Philo of Alexandria, a writer at the opposite pole of thought from the orthodox Judaism of his day; so much for the suggestion that his peculiar and fanciful speculations represent the common views of all his contemporaries! And even Philo did not apply his speculations to the Messiah, but to other men: so that even on the theory propounded there was nothing extraordinary in the announcement made to Saint Joseph. Why then should he be warned to "fear not"? But there is in Matthew no sign of Philonic influence. Philo was a theosophist who allegorized all the meaning out of Old Testament history: Matthew produces a plain, simple, direct narrative, as his whole gospel exemplifies. There is no sort of comparison between the isolated, more than semi-pagan "mystic," and the Jewish-Christian author writing in Palestine, the home of historical traditions, under the direction of common sense.¹

It may be asked from whom we are to suppose that Matthew derived the information for his first two chapters? If we are frank we shall say that we do not know. It has been suggested by Prof. Stanton² that together with other passages in this gospel in which explicit reference is made

¹ For further discussion of this theory see Thorburn, *Doctrine of the Virgin Birth*, and cf. Gore *Dissertations*, pp. 61 seqq.

² *Gospels as Historical Documents*, Part II, pp. 342 seqq.

to the fulfilment of prophecy, the stories of the Birth and Infancy may belong to a Catena of Fulfilments of the prophecies contained in the Old Testament. We think Prof. Stanton considerably overrates the evidence for this theory. He himself notices the objection that there are no express appeals to prophecy in Matthew in connexion with the Passion. Yet here would be the most fruitful field for any one compiling a Catena. But a more serious objection is, that of the seven contexts enumerated, outside the present chapters, in which this direct appeal is found, the source of all but two is already known to us: they come straight from Mark. In one case the prophecy itself occurs in Mark, and is transferred bodily thence embedded in its context to the pages of Matthew; in the other four the prophecy is an addition to the Marcan narrative. In face of this it is difficult to believe that Matthew himself was not responsible for inserting references to the predictions of the Old Testament wherever they were not already noticed either expressly or by implication in his sources. But if Matthew did not use any such Catena, we are left without evidence about the source of chapters i and ii.

We are therefore thrown back upon conjecture. Internal considerations have suggested the view that, ultimately, Saint Joseph may have issued the information. But he was probably dead before Christ's public ministry even began, and the only links between him and the Church of which we know the existence (though there might just conceivably have been others) are our Lady and the "brethren" of the Lord. Of these the latter did not believe until the Resurrection, and can therefore hardly be supposed to have been entrusted with the secret of the Virgin Birth. It is possible that Saint Joseph might have left a document to his spouse relating to the facts of her conception of our Lord as far as they had affected himself, in case scandal should ever arise; but if no scandal arose at the time, there was not much ground for fearing that it would arise later, and in any case it is not easy to see why such a document should have included the history of the flight into Egypt. It is perhaps better therefore to suggest that these chapters represent the story imparted after their

conversion to the "brethren" of the Lord by the Blessed Virgin. She must most certainly have been acquainted by her husband and protector of all that is herein contained; and it was just these matters in which they for their part would have been most interested if, as seems likely, they were the children of Saint Joseph. It is no contradiction to this theory, which is admittedly conjectural, that we had reason to conclude she also was the source of the corresponding but quite different stories in Saint Luke's gospel. Those dwell upon her own experiences, her motherly love and wonder and admiration for her Child, and are precisely what she might have confided to her women friends; to the children of Saint Joseph she would more naturally have spoken of what concerned the man, the husband, and their own father.

III

THE "WESTERN" READINGS

WE now pass to the question previously reserved, about the reading in Matthew's genealogy. There are serious signs of textual uncertainty in verse 16 of the first chapter. The Greek manuscripts, with the exception of a single group mentioned below, all read as follows: Ἰακώβ δὲ ἐγέννησεν τὸν Ἰωσήφ τὸν ἄνδρα Μαρίας, ἐξ ἧς ἐγεννήθη Ἰησοῦς ὁ λεγόμενος χριστός, "and Jacob begat Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ." But there is widespread though not quite consistent evidence for the existence in very early times of a totally different reading. This fact raises a number of acute problems, to which we shall in turn be forced to devote attention. And first of all it is required to discover what is the text that underlies the divergent forms of this second yet all but primitive reading.

Traces of the alternative reading are found in the two extant copies (Sinaitic and Curetonian) of the "Evangelion da-Mepharreshe," or Old Syriac, in seven Old Latin manuscripts, in the Armenian version, and in five of a group, called the Ferrar Group, of Greek cursives.¹ Now the reading contained or presupposed in the majority of these authorities, giving it for convenience in Latin, is, "Jacob autem genuit Joseph, cui desponsata virgo Maria genuit Jesum qui vocatur (dicitur) Christus," or, simply "genuit Jesum Christum." But the Sinaitic Syriac version and two of the Old Latin manuscripts must be noticed as containing variants. Let us consider the Old Latin manuscripts first. One of them is our old acquaintance *b* (Cod.

¹ Certain other members of the group are defective at this point, while one is said to have the "received" reading (Gore, *Dissertations*, p. 299, note).

Veron.). It reads, "Joseph, cui desponsata *erat* virgo Maria, *virgo autem* Maria genuit Jesum Christum." It is partially supported by the second Old Latin manuscript referred to,¹ which is however far later in date than any of the other six of those mentioned above, and belongs to the twelfth century. The reading of *b* also appears to derive some support from the Curetonian Syriac. This codex reads, "Joseph, *him* to whom *was* betrothed Mary the Virgin, *she who* bare Jesus the Messiah." It will be seen that this version makes "was betrothed" a substantive verb instead of a participle, and so far bears out the reading of *b*. In fact it has been argued that it may have been translated from a manuscript in which the wording ran as in *b*, because it is well known that the authors of the early versions allowed themselves considerable freedom in translation, and the writer of the Curetonian Syriac version was no exception to the general rule. "All the later Syriac versions," writes Professor Burkitt in the *Encyclopaedia Biblica* (col. 5001), "such as the Harclean, are marked by excessive literalness; but the Evangelion da-Mepharreshe is less conventional and more idiomatic than the Peshitta."²

But the same fact prevents our laying much stress upon this argument: for even on a superficial view the Curetonian Syriac runs quite sufficiently near the reading of the majority of the Old Latin manuscripts for its text to be regarded as agreeing with theirs. This will be seen from a comparison of the three texts.

OLD LATIN, ETC.	CURETONIAN	COD. VERON.
Joseph, cui desponsata virgo Maria genuit Jesum.	Joseph, <i>him</i> to whom <i>was</i> betrothed Mary the Virgin, <i>she who</i> bare Jesus.	Joseph, cui desponsata <i>erat</i> virgo Maria <i>virgo autem</i> Maria genuit Jesum.

"She who" really bears very slight resemblance to "virgo autem Maria." And indeed upon investigation it seems that probably the Greek text presupposed by the Curetonian version is precisely that implied by the Old Latin manuscripts. The present writer is assured that it is no less

¹ "c," Cod. Colbert.

² See also note in Gore, *Dissertations*, p. 300, and cf. text of *Evangelion da-Mepharreshe* in Burkitt's edition.

impossible to translate the Old Latin reading both idiomatically and literally word by word into Syriac than it is to do so into English ; in fact the text of the Curetonian version is the nearest approach of which the Syriac language is capable to a literal reproduction of the Greek words : $\bar{\omega}$ μνηστευθεῖσα παρθένος Μαριάμ ἐγέννησεν Ἰησοῦν. Syriac idiom forbids the dependent participle *μνηστευθεῖσα* to be rendered otherwise than in conjunction with a substantive verb, and when allowance has been made for that, the Curetonian text falls into line not with *b* at all, but with the other Old Latin manuscripts.¹

In view of this it is necessary to consider the reading of *b* purely upon its own merits. Now what authority that manuscript possesses we have already had some occasion to observe. We have seen already that it contains two variants of importance, each of which stands unsupported by manuscript evidence and is to be rejected without hesitation as a corruption. Now it comes up for judgment once again, and the evidence brought forward on its side is exiguous, weak, and indecisive at the best. We shall not hesitate once again to condemn it, and to account for its reading in this verse solely by an unauthorized desire to close the genealogy with a clause at once orthodox and at the same time subservient in verbal uniformity to the general type of the preceding clauses.

Thus far we have succeeded in reducing the variations before us to a single form. One manuscript indeed, *d* (the Latin of Cod. Bezae), reads *peperit* for *genuit*, but this is so likely to be a correction that it may be disregarded. At any rate the Greek original must have been *ἐγέννησεν*, which is sometimes used of the mother as well as in its more normal sense of the father. The only point outstanding concerns the end of the verse, whether we should read “*Jesum Christum*” or “*Jesum qui vocatur (dicitur) Christus.*” This is not important, and the probability is that different versions of early date made use of varying forms, rendering with more or less diverging accuracy the Greek *Ἰησοῦν τὸν λεγόμενον χριστόν.*

¹ This view is not in contradiction to that of Professor Burkitt, who thinks that the precise form of the Curetonian has been influenced by being a correction of the (earlier) Sinaitic Syriac version.

But now we come to quite a distinct variation from the common form of this alternative text. The Sinaitic Syriac, which yet remains to be cited, agrees in broad outline with the form with which we are now familiar as against the usual form of the Greek manuscripts, but distinctly attributes the paternity of Jesus to Saint Joseph. Its peculiarities will best be seen from a comparison of the two texts.

SINAITIC.

Jacob begat Joseph :
Joseph, to whom *was* betrothed
 Mary the Virgin,
 begat Jesus.

OLD LATIN, ETC.

Jacob autem genuit Joseph
 cui desponsata
 virgo Maria
 genuit Jesum

The first question that now arises is : What Greek text is represented in the wording of the Sinaitic version ?

It need not be insisted further that the Sinaitic text belongs in general form to the so-called "Western" type which is reproduced in all the other manuscripts to which we have been devoting attention in the last few pages. It is in fact verbally closer to the "Ferrar" and Old Latin manuscripts even than the Curetonian version ; for the excision of two words in the translation brings it precisely parallel to them. Furthermore, authority has already been quoted for believing that one of those two words, which is also inserted in the Curetonian text, is a necessary addition required by the exigencies of translation from Greek into Syriac. Let us for the moment assume that the writer of Codex Sinaiticus did have before him what is called the "Western" text. Allowance being made for the "was" we may regard the following as being the problem which confronted him. The text as he would then be compelled to translate it ran :

Jacob begat Joseph
 to whom was betrothed
 Mary the Virgin
 begat Jesus.

It was required to make sense and grammar out of this material, which end could only be achieved by the insertion of something somewhere into the text. Now the writer of the later¹ manuscript, the Curetonian, solved the

¹ Duval thinks otherwise : we follow Burkitt.

same problem by inserting "who" before the ἐγέννησεν (begat) that lay in front of him. Upon the present assumption of the translator of the Sinaitic version adopted a bolder, freer course, in deeper consonance alike with the spirit of the original and with literary grace. He saw that the genealogy was Saint Joseph's, that the descent of Jesus was being traced by the male line throughout. We shall shortly discuss the question whether he regarded this descent as natural or legal, physical or putative; and so much may be anticipated as to say that he unquestionably thought of it as merely legal. But for the moment the only point of consequence is that unless the genealogy was to be futile and its insertion in the gospel fatuous, the last step must be taken to possess in some sense the same meaning as every previous one: as the reader's mind is directed in review from Abraham to Isaac, from David to Solomon, from Jeconiah to Salathiel (though it has been thought that Salathiel was not Jeconiah's son), so is it meant to pass from Joseph to Jesus and discover there the same relationship. This fact the writer simply and plainly appreciates. He inserts "Joseph," and therewith his version assumes the form in which we have it: "Jacob begat Joseph; *Joseph*, to whom was betrothed Mary the Virgin, begat Jesus."

Our assumption seems to work well. The conclusion to which it leads us implies the use, by the writer of Codex Sinaiticus, of principles which are in complete harmony with those we see employed by the translators of all other early versions. "The Evangelion da-Mepharreshe is less conventional and more idiomatic" than the later Syriac versions. The dictum may in this case be extended to apply not only to the Evangelion da-Mepharreshe as against the Peshitta, but to the Sinaitic as against the Curetonian text. The Curetonian reading of this verse is clumsy but more literal; the Sinaitic is more of a literary paraphrase.

There is one very important piece of internal evidence that favours the truth of the assumption we have made. The Sinaitic version expressly refers to Mary as "the Virgin," and unlike the ordinary Greek text does not call Saint Joseph her husband, but rather emphasizes the fact

that at the time (whatever that may be) to which its statement refers she was only "betrothed" to him. "Joseph," it reads, "to whom was betrothed Mary the Virgin, begat Jesus." Now if this is to be interpreted with blind and dogged devotion to the literal text, it can only mean that though Saint Joseph was the natural father of our Lord, Mary was merely in a legal or putative sense His mother: actually his female parent was some other woman, Mary being a Virgin. In other words, to be obstinately literal is here to be ridiculous.

However, overlooking the fact that the version reads "betrothed" instead of "married," some critics try to prove that "Virgin" is to be taken as a formal title meaning "Widow," not peculiar to Mary but of general application. In support of this contention three texts have been quoted from the Fathers of the second century. Of these two are entirely irrelevant, and the third (by far the earliest, and on that ground alone the most important) proves the exact contrary of the theory which it is designed to reinforce. It shows not that widows were generally called "virgins" in the early Church, but that the writer was the first to apply to them this mystical title. The reference is to Saint Ignatius' letter to Smyrna (composed about A.D. 110), at the close of which the martyr writes, "I salute the households of my brethren with their wives and children, and the virgins known as widows." Lightfoot's note on the passage proves the meaning to be "(I salute) those women, virgins in the eyes of God, whom the world at large calls 'widows.'" There may even have existed by this time celibate maidens, as well as women living in the unmarried state after the death of their husbands, in the ecclesiastical order of Widows, which is first referred to in the New Testament. But if so, they were called "Widows"; the widows were not called "Virgins." The passage proves nothing about the Virgin Mary: there is not a shred of evidence or a rag of probability that her exclusive title of "the Virgin" was given her for any other reason than that tradition and the gospels depicted her as the virgin mother of the Lord.

The attribution of virginity to Mary in this verse of the Sinaitic version proves at least that the source from which

the text was translated was orthodox upon the point. The attribution of paternity to Saint Joseph therefore either found no place in that source, or was there understood in a purely legal sense. Or perhaps we may go so far as to say that both these alternatives must have been fulfilled. There must have been implied some kind of paternal relationship of Saint Joseph to our Lord, and yet in view of all that has been said above, and the absence of any other evidence in definitely Christian statements for calling Christ the son of Joseph, it is improbable that the mention of such relationship was explicit. The solution therefore of the problem which has hitherto been treated as an assumption, may now fairly be regarded as confirmed.

It may afford no slight reassurance to those who have followed the preceding argument with sympathy to find that such an authority on the Syriac versions as Prof. Burkitt is ranged upon their side. The main reason that leads him to form his opinion is different from the considerations upon which we have been engaged. It is in brief the impossibility of rendering back the reading of the Sinaitic text into any form of Greek words that would "run harmoniously with the rest of the genealogy." He thus supplies the negative side of the proof of which we have been dealing with the positive side. His testimony is the more valuable in that he treats the question strictly as "a matter of literary criticism, not of historical fact." Yet this is his conclusion. "It is with genuine regret—I must ask my readers to excuse this expression of personal feeling—that I find myself unable to derive the reading of the Sinai Palimpsest from anything but β ." [By this symbol he has for convenience of reference denoted the reading of the "Ferrar" and Old Latin manuscripts.] "I believe that S [i.e. Sinaiticus] accurately preserves the original text of the Old Syriac version in this passage, and that all the other Syriac variants (in C [i.e. Curetonian], in Aphraates and elsewhere) are derived from that of S. But the reading of S itself I have come to regard as nothing more than a paraphrase of the reading of the 'Ferrar Group,' the Syriac translator taking ϕ to refer to $\epsilon\gamma\acute{\epsilon}\nu\eta\sigma\epsilon\nu$ as well as to $\mu\eta\sigma\tau\epsilon\upsilon\theta\acute{\epsilon}\iota\sigma\alpha$."

The result thus obtained reduces to the common form

the last variation with which we set out to deal. It may now be taken that among all the manuscripts which in Matthew i. 16 present a reading different from the ordinary there is essential agreement. The text to which they all are seen to witness is that of which the "Ferrari" group supplies the Greek wording, ᾧ μνηστευθείσα παρθένος Μαριάμ ἐγέννησεν Ἰησοῦν τὸν λεγόμενον χριστόν. But before we pass on it would be well to call attention to one more point, a small one, in connexion with this reading. It used to be thought that the Dialogue of Timothy and Aquila (fifth century?) quoted a conflated text of Matthew, in which after the received reading of this verse there were appended the words καὶ Ἰωσήφ ἐγέννησεν τὸν Ἰησοῦν τὸν λεγόμενον χριστόν. It was imagined that the Dialogue thus presented a text of Matthew in which the readings of the ordinary Greek manuscripts and of the Sinaitic version (though the latter shorn of half its length) were combined. This is a bubble which seems to linger and float against the laws of nature after somebody has pricked it.¹ The Dialogue cites this verse in two other places, each time from the received text, although with variations due to loose quotation. In the passage under discussion (edit. Oxford, 1898, p. 76) the verse is cited for the third time, and accurately, according to the received text; but the words that follow are no part of the quotation from the gospel, and the assumption that they are is groundless. There is really no doubt that they are intended as a comment on the text of scripture, uttered by the Jew in whose mouth the whole passage is placed. This is shown by the insertion of τὸν before Ἰησοῦν, although it does not occur either in the received or in the "Western" text. But coming in a comment it is quite in place, and means "the" Jesus mentioned in the biblical quotation that immediately precedes. The καί therefore is inferential. Indeed the meaning becomes perfectly clear from the words which follow in the Dialogue. The whole passage runs as follows: " 'Jacob begat Joseph the husband of Mary, from whom was born Jesus that is called Christ.' And so Joseph begat the Jesus that is called Christ about whom we are

¹ E.g. Burkitt, *Evangelion da-Mepharreshe*, II, p. 265.

talking; it means he begat him from Mary." (Καὶ Ἰωσήφ ἐγέννησεν τὸν Ἰησοῦν τὸν λεγόμενον χριστὸν περὶ ᾧ νῦν ὁ λόγος, φησὶν ἐγέννησεν ἐκ τῆς Μαρίας.)

It may perhaps be thought that Codex Sinaiticus has already occupied attention for as long as, or longer than its peculiarities deserve. But so much has been built erroneously upon its readings that although the orthodoxy of its source has been fully vindicated, it yet remains to recapitulate as briefly as is possible the proof that the codex itself is equally untainted: otherwise it might be thought that its translator was possessed of private information which led him while following the main drift of his source to mark his disapproval of its doctrine by a silent series of depreciatory incursions on the text.

We have seen that the Sinaitic version does more than call Saint Joseph the father of Christ in verse 16: it also omits the significant clause of verse 25, and inserts the datives "to thee" and "to him" in verses 21 and 25.¹ We may add that in Saint Luke's gospel, chapter ii, verse 5, it substitutes the more accurate word "wife" for the ordinary reading "betrothed." Does this amount to proof that the Sinaitic version disbelieves the story of the Virgin Birth? We have to reckon with the following facts. The addition of ethic datives in general is characteristic of the version, and need here be due to nothing but appreciation of the honour done to Saint Joseph in that he was appointed to be the foster-father of the Messiah, and to have the Son of God accounted as his heir. Undoubtedly in that sense Mary bare to him a son; and all the greater would the privilege be reckoned among a people which was imbued like the Jewish nation with strongly patriarchal ideas, if an heir denied in the course of nature were vouchsafed by a loving providence through other means. The fact that Christ was not Saint Joseph's natural offspring only made the privilege appear more gracious. It was the successor, and he the Messiah, that was wanted rather than the son. The feeling may be illustrated by a passage expressing a similar notion in Tennyson's "Coming of Arthur."

¹ See Chapter II, "The Evidence of Matthew;" p. 27.

“ Then the two
 Dropt to the cove, and watch'd the great sea fall,
 Wave after wave, each mightier than the last,
 Till last, a ninth one, gathering half the deep
 And full of voices, slowly rose and plunged
 Roaring, and all the wave was in a flame ;
 And down the wave and in the flame was borne
 A naked babe, and rode to Merlin's feet,
 Who stoopt and caught the babe, and cried, ' The King !
 Here is an heir for Uther ! ' ”

The fact that counted for Saint Joseph was the coming of the Heir to David ; the manner of his coming was comparatively immaterial.

We have already had reason to discountenance any claim for accepting the reading of the Codex Sinaiticus in verse 25.¹ The omission of “ he knew her not until ” is a corruption, not a preservation of the original text. But the readiest explanation of it is precisely that the text unaltered might have been thought to deny the perpetual virginity of Mary. The omission is due, if not to accident, then to an exaggerated fear of misunderstanding. Then upon the substitution of “ wife ” for “ betrothed ” in Luke ii. 5 we have also touched already. It is noticeable that in the ordinary texts of the gospel Saint Luke never calls Mary the wife of Saint Joseph, nor Saint Joseph the husband of Mary. In this passage he even calls Mary the betrothed of Saint Joseph when she was already in the eyes of the world his wedded wife. But in the most strictly orthodox texts of the first gospel Saint Joseph is twice referred to as the husband of the Virgin,² and she is twice called his wife :³ it is not an expression from which the Christian consciousness necessarily shrank, although Saint Luke himself avoided it. Its occurrence in the Codex Sinaiticus proves nothing either one way or the other. It is an instance of the unconventionality which is characteristic of this and other early versions, and has no further significance.

¹ Chapter II, p. 27.

² Matt. i. 16, i. 19. Neither time does Codex Sinaiticus include the description !

³ Matt. i. 20, i. 24. In both these cases Codex Sinaiticus agrees with the received text.

The only way in which these few peculiarities could affect our view of the manuscript before us would be by giving weight to an argument from the cumulative effect of instances in themselves unimportant. This kind of argument is only valid if there exists no contrary accumulation of instances that point in the opposite direction. But in the present case that is exactly what we do at once observe: there does exist a strong body of evidence to the contrary of the naturalistic interpretation. We have proved, and need no here repeat the proof, that the narratives as a whole both of Saint Luke and of Matthew are committed beyond hope of retractation to the miraculous view of Christ's conception. Especially is this the case with Matthew: that view is inextricably bound up in the texture of his story. If the foster-fatherhood of Saint Joseph is the woof, the virginity of Mary is the warp of his narrative. This is the more important for our present purpose as the Sinaitic version has lost the whole leaf which contained the most crucial portion of the Lucan account, namely the story of the Annunciation. But the Matthaean narrative stands in the version un mutilated. The codex first of all includes in verse 16 the "bet rothed" and the "Virgin" of the alternative text, those most significant contributions to the subject tendered only by the "Western" manuscripts. Then it contains the indications found in all the other manuscripts of belief in the Virgin Birth. It has the statement that Mary was found with child before marriage. It gives the whole account of Saint Joseph's distress and of the resolution to which he was thereby impelled: both these pieces of information are entirely pointless except upon the supposition that he had no expectation of becoming a father. It reproduces in full the testimony of the words attributed in orthodox texts to the angelic visitor; and it sets the seal to its witness by recording the Isaianic prophecy, which in such a context means nothing if not that Jesus' mother was a virgin.

Let us revert for a moment to verse 16. Undoubtedly in any register or record from which the genealogy may have been originally compiled there would be no mention whatever of the Virgin Birth: the table of descent would be drawn up in symmetrical fashion and the formula

"begat" would not be varied. It is the legal and the social aspect that one looks for in an official document. That is the reason why Christians who believed in the Virgin Birth were ready to speak as they did about the fatherhood of Saint Joseph: it was as we have seen the language applicable to our Lord's official status. This was fully recognized by the writer of the Sinaitic version: we assumed above that only in the light of such knowledge did he write verse 16 in the form in which he did. That this is true there is also an indication in the text. Verse 17 is parenthetical, containing the mnemonic summary of the genealogy. Verse 18 immediately proceeds, "*Now* the birth of the Messiah was thus: when Mary . . ." etc., giving the account of the virginal conception. That is to say, the narrative beginning at verse 18 is expressly meant to convey in what sense the statement of verse 16 is intended to be taken. The conjunction is explanatory, and links what follows on to what has gone before. Here is the clue. The codex does not leave even an apparent inconsistency unresolved: it interprets verse 16 by the ensuing narrative of verses 18 to 25. This is exactly agreeable with its attitude in Luke iii. 23, where its reading bears the ordinary sense, "Now Jesus, being about thirty years old, was supposed to be the son of Joseph." There is no ground whatever for uncertainty: the Codex Sinaiticus is as "orthodox" as any other manuscript.

In conclusion we may briefly illustrate from an uncanonical document the habit which the Codex shares with other works of combining a firm belief in the virginity of Mary with behaviour which is open to be considered superficially at variance with acceptance of that doctrine. The Protevangelium Jacobi is thought to be derived from second century material so far as the story of the birth of Jesus is concerned, although the work as a whole in its present form is considerably later. Now the Protevangelium was composed in honour of our Lady, and insists with what has been described as "wearisome iteration" upon her perpetual virginity: it seems regardless sometimes in the exposition of its theme alike of modesty or taste. But even here in such a work as this we find phenomena parallel to the peculiarities which have caused the Sinaitic version

to be called in question. In the history of the Annunciation the words found in Saint Luke's account of that event, "I know not a man," are omitted, although the context clearly shows acquaintance with the passage in the third gospel. And in the oldest complete manuscript of the Protevangelium, a Syriac palimpsest of the fifth or sixth century, the text of the angelic revelation to Saint Joseph reads, "She shall bear *to thee* a Son," in the very words of the Sinaitic version. If this is compatible with belief in Mary's virginity in the Protevangelium it is no less compatible with that belief elsewhere.

The tangle of readings in verse 16 has now been straightened and in passing we have vindicated the orthodoxy of the Sinaitic Syriac version. The final conclusion we have reached may then be summarized as follows: neither in the received text of Matthew nor in any version of it, nor in any known variant reading, is there to be read a hint of disbelief in the doctrine of the Virgin Birth.

NOTE ON THE ORIGIN OF THE DIVERGENCE OF READING IN MATTHEW I. 16.

It remains to account so far as possible for the existence of the two divergent forms of the text in Matthew i. 16. It has been suggested that the genealogy was not originally prefixed to Matthew by its author; but that at some date subsequent to its first publication the gospel was enriched with this addition, whether by the hand of some immediate successor of the author or at some time in the middle of the second century, being a matter of dispute between different advocates of the theory. Now from whatever record, public or private, the genealogy was drawn, it would almost certainly in its original state have ended with the assertion that Joseph begat Jesus. Such a feature naturally would be softened down when the genealogy was included in the gospel, if only to avoid the superficial inconsistency with what came after; and if it really did not form part of the original draft, there is not much difficulty in supposing that a different formula might have been invented to describe the fatherhood of Saint Joseph in different archetypes. The evidence for this theory therefore needs to be examined.

Comment has been made upon the fact that neither in Apology i. 33 nor in Dialogue against Trypho 78 does Justin

Martyr refer to the genealogy, although in either place it would not have seemed unnatural for him to do so. But in neither chapter is there any particular reason why he need have mentioned it; and as a matter of fact he does refer to a genealogy of Christ in chapter 120 of the Dialogue. Here is a translation of the passage. "It does not say this [the promise that 'in thy seed shall all the tribes of the earth be blessed'] to Esau or to Reuben or to any one else, but to them out of whom the Christ according to the dispensation through the Virgin Mary was to come. . . . For the seed is separated after Jacob and descends through Judah and Perez and Jesse and David." This looks uncommonly like a reference to a gospel genealogy, although it is not conclusive proof for Matthew, since all the names occur equally in the Lucan tree.

It is not important that Tatian's Diatessaron contained no genealogy: it has puzzled many scholars to make a harmony between Matthew and Saint Luke upon this matter, and no doubt it puzzled Tatian. It is perhaps more serious that eight Latin manuscripts begin the gospel at verse 18; but on examination they prove all to be manuscripts of Jerome's translation, and Jerome tells us expressly that Matthew started with a pedigree. This evidence considerably detracts from any weight that might have been put upon the placing of the initial letter of the gospel at verse 18, instead of at verse 1, in certain Irish Latin manuscripts. The tendency here disclosed clearly is to omit the existing genealogy as valueless, not to prefix one to a gospel which originally did not contain it.

But the real ground on which the claim to separate the genealogy from the remainder of the gospel is advanced, is not external but internal, and consists in the supposed doctrinal contradiction between verse 16 and what follows. Now no contradiction exists, unless we take the reading of Codex Sinaiticus to furnish the true text of verse 16; and even then only if the title "Virgin" is ignored and the verb "begat" taken in the physical sense. But it seems certain in the first place that the writer is not thinking of physical paternity at all; and it seems unquestionable in the second place that Codex Sinaiticus is only translating somewhat loosely the reading of the "Ferrar" manuscripts, a reading which is more unexceptionably orthodox even than that of the received text. The argument in favour of disintegration therefore falls to the ground. There is no reason to think that the gospel ever existed without the genealogy.

So much for the negative evidence. On the other hand,

Epiphanius states that the genealogy had a place at an early date in the Gospel according to the Hebrews,¹ which was, he tells us, an "adulterated and clipped" version of the canonical Matthew, circulating in Hebrew among Ebionite sects.² As Irenaeus seems to identify the two gospels, and Jerome, who was perfectly well acquainted with them, both undoubtedly considered them to be substantially the same, this statement may well be true. In that case there is considerable probability, even if the evidence is not absolutely conclusive, that the genealogy was a primitive constituent of the canonical gospel.

The theory that the genealogy was prefixed after publication therefore has to be dismissed; and a like fate must be meted out to the theory that the genealogy circulated independently of the gospel as well as in the evangelical text, and that the "Ferrar" reading really belongs to the independent version of the genealogy. The case is not proven: there is no evidence for it. The divergence of reading must be explained otherwise, by the supposition of some direct relation between the two texts.

Some years ago a well-known scholar concluded that the present received text is a corruption which replaced the "Ferrar" or "Western" reading early in the third century. We venture to say that this view is untenable. It seems, indeed, so probable that one might almost call it certain, that there was a revision of the text at Alexandria about the beginning of the third century: "a predominantly 'non-Western' text was current in Egypt from about Origen's time onwards."³ It is also true that this "revised" text (the "Neutral" text of Westcott and Hort) apparently contained our received reading in Matthew i. 16, and not the reading found in the "Ferrar" manuscripts. But that the received reading was not then a new one, but had existed in manuscripts previously, is rendered highly probable by the following fact. Just about the time when this revision was taking place in Alexandria, or more probably a few years earlier, the received reading is quoted without any comment by Tertullian in the West.⁴ This goes to prove that Origen, or whoever it may be that is responsible for having edited the "Neutral" text,

¹ *Panar.* xxx. 14.

² *Ib.* xxx. 3 and 13.

³ Burkitt, *Enc. Biblica*, col. 4988, cf. Lake, *Text of the New Testament*, p. 70.

⁴ *De Carne Christi*, 20.

had authority for his reading in Matthew i. 16 : it either stood already in the Alexandrian text or was supported by manuscripts accessible also in the West. At any rate it was not the mere conjecture or invention of his own brain. In other words the received reading is probably as old as the "Western" one, and in the critical opinion of the "Neutral" editor it is older, or he would scarcely have preferred it to the other.

This conclusion may be supported on two further grounds, one external, the other internal. We are told by Epiphanius that "Cerinthus and Carpocrates, who used the same gospel that they [the Ebionites] possess, attempt to prove from the beginning of the gospel according to Matthew, by means the genealogy, that Christ was of the seed of Joseph and Mary."¹ Similarly Eusebius quoted Origen for the statement that the Ebionite Symmachus supported the same doctrine by recourse to Matthew.² Now if these heretics had had the "Western" reading at the end of their genealogy they could not possibly have rested their contention upon that. It is true that the reference probably in both cases, certainly in the first, is to the gospel according to the Hebrews rather than to the canonical Matthew, and as we have seen, that document was apparently a garbled version of our first gospel ; but no charge is preferred against them of tampering with the true reading of the passage, and it certainly looks as if they were possessed of the received text, and were using verse 16 in the same way as the Jew is made to do in the Dialogue of Timothy and Aquila already quoted above.³

The second consideration is that no one altering the text would be in the least degree likely to substitute for the clear implication of the Virgin Birth contained in the "Western" reading any statement so obscure upon the subject and so liable to misinterpretation as the "husband of Mary" and the "from whom was born" of the received text.

Our conclusion then on every ground is that the "Western" reading is a very early corruption of the true text, designed to obviate the latter's ambiguity : very early, because so widely diffused as to be found both in the Old Latin and in the Old Syriac (from which the Armenian version is also said to have been translated). As Professor Burkitt puts it, "S and k agree in a common corruption." This still survives in Greek in the "Ferrar" manuscripts. The true reading was, however, not entirely superseded, as we learn from Tertullian's use of it : there are independent grounds for thinking that he derived it not from any Old Latin manuscript but direct from the

¹ *Panar.* xxx. 14.

² *Eus. H.E.* vi. 17.

³ Ch. III, p. 39.

Greek. This true reading was estimated at its proper worth by the editor of the "Neutral" text early in the third century, and in subsequent texts regained the whole of the position which in the second century it had so nearly lost.

IV

THE GOSPEL HISTORY

THE position thus far reached is briefly this. The first and third gospels, each with its Birth narrative as an integral part of it, have the right to be treated as historical documents of high value for the reconstruction of the events with which they deal; their right is such that if they related to ordinary events of secular history it would not be questioned, far less seriously challenged; and the witness of each to the crucial fact is perfectly straightforward, single-minded, and thoroughgoing. Our next task will be shortly to review the evidence which they jointly supply and thus attempt to gain a consecutive history, piecing together their separate statements in the way familiar to those who have studied the secular history of the age. We shall be thankful that meagre as in some respects our authorities may seem to be, they are far more complete and reliable than those upon which we have to base most of our conclusions in the secular history of the same period.

We are introduced first to the family of a Jewish priest named Zacharias, who had long been childless, but at the opening of the story was by revelation promised a son. His wife Elizabeth conceived, and this part of the narrative is taken forward five months and there for the moment dropped.¹ Elizabeth had a kinswoman,² younger than herself, named Mary, who was living at a town in Galilee called Nazareth, some days' journey distant from the home of Zacharias, which was in the hill-country of Judaea to the south of Jerusalem.³ Mary was not yet married, but was betrothed, an arrangement which among the Jews

¹ Luke i. 5-25.

² Luke i. 36.

³ Luke i. 39.

was binding and led to marriage in due course. Her intended husband was named Joseph. He was of the family of David, and we are probably to infer from Luke ii. 4 that his original home was at Bethlehem, a few miles north of Jerusalem. However, a few months later he seems to have been living with Mary at Nazareth,¹ and it seems probable that he had removed his domicile to that place before the opening of the story.

As yet, however, Joseph and Mary were still unwed, when in the course of the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy the angel named Gabriel, who had made the previous revelation to Zacharias, appeared to Mary, and announced to her that the Holy Ghost should come upon her and cause her to be with child in her virginity. He further stated that her kinswoman Elizabeth would in less than four months become the mother of a child. After some interval of time Mary determined to visit Elizabeth. Saint Luke writes that Mary arose "in these days" and journeyed to the home of Zacharias. The expression "in these days" is characteristic of Saint Luke, and never seems to mean "immediately after the events last recorded." It was "in these days" that our Lord after a whole night in prayer selected his twelve apostles,² that Saint Peter suggested the election of a new apostle into the place of the traitor Judas,³ and that the murmuring arose from the Hellenist Christians against the Hebrews over the ministration to the respective widows.⁴ In all these passages the phrase denotes a vague sequence, not an immediate consequence. Mary therefore seems to be depicted in the gospel as waiting for some time, perhaps even for weeks, pondering her revelation and then preparing for her absence from home: indeed we might not unreasonably suppose that she waited for an invitation from her kinswoman, since at the time of the Annunciation Elizabeth's condition was clearly still unknown in Nazareth,⁵ and Mary could not have given it out as the occasion for her journey without announcing also that she had been saluted by the angel and promised a Son herself. Then after a short interval

¹ Luke ii. 4.

⁴ Acts vi. 1, R.V.

² Luke vi. 12, R.V. ⁵ Cf. Luke i. 24 with 36.

³ Acts i. 15, R.V.

she set out eagerly,¹ reached her kinswoman's house, and received the inspired² veneration of Elizabeth, "Whence is this to me,³ that the mother of my Lord should come to me," and "Blessed art thou among women."

The account of the Visitation is rounded off with the statement that Mary stayed "about three months" with her kinswoman, and then returned home.⁴ A visit of "about three months" would naturally mean one of slightly over three months, if anything, rather than one of "nearly" three months: so that if we have regard to the indications of time already given and allow something for Mary's delay and for her journey, it would seem probable that she is intended to be taken as still present in the house of Zacharias when Saint John the Baptist was born, and playing her part in the company of neighbours and kinsfolk who celebrated that occasion.⁵ The Benedictus thus acquires a fresh shade of interest if it was uttered by its author in the ears of Mary herself. It forms no objection to this theory that her return is mentioned by the evangelist before the birth of the Baptist, because the narrative throughout these chapters is divided into distinct and independent sections, as it were by bulkheads, and the Visitation episode needs to be completed, on this system, before the story of the Baptist is resumed. There is a parallel to this inversion of the historical order in the two verses with which the first chapter ends and the second begins: a summary of the growth and early manhood of Saint John is placed immediately before the story of the Birth at Bethlehem.

At some time not specified by our authorities after Mary's return from Judaea, the season came round for the fulfil-

¹ The words "with haste" (Luke i. 39) refer solely to the journey itself, being far removed from the beginning of the sentence. "Haste" (*σπουδή*) refers more to mental condition than to temporal sequence: Mary was full of diligence and eager anticipation to see the fulfilment of the prophecy about Elizabeth. Cf. Mark vi. 25, where "straightway" = immediately, "with haste" = with diligent obedience to her mother and eager anticipation of the fulfilment of Herod's promise.

² Luke i. 41 fin.

³ I.e. "How have I deserved this honour?"

⁴ Luke i. 56.

⁵ Luke i. 58.

ment of her contract of marriage with Joseph. It now became necessary to acquaint him with her destiny and condition, and he was thrown into very great distress. His disappointment and sorrow can only be measured by the strength of his affection, which did not desert him even in such trouble, when his trust seems to have been altogether undermined ; for we read that he was " a just man " and therefore unable to disregard what he believed was the result of very grievous sin, yet decided not to " make her a public example."¹ How the knowledge which caused him his anxiety came to him can only be conjectured. It may be that after the conclusion of the public ceremonies of his marriage he learned the facts from his wife's own lips. The text of the gospel might if pressed lend some colour to this suggestion, as in Matthew i. 18 we read that no marriage had been consummated between the pair, yet in verse 20 Mary is definitely called Joseph's wife : " Fear not to take unto thee thy wife Mary," where the Greek is not capable of being translated " to take Mary unto thee as thy wife."² But in view of the binding nature of the Jewish betrothal she might have been so called before the wedding ceremonies had taken place, and it is perhaps more natural to suppose that her parents were aware by this time of what could not be longer hidden from her mother, and that they informed her promised husband.

Joseph then at first purposed breaking off the contract of marriage, if the wedding had not been celebrated, or else of divorcing his wife, if it had been celebrated, though by private arrangement, to avoid open scandal.³ But that night the truth of the allegations put forward on Mary's behalf, concerning the supernatural cause of her condition, was confirmed to him by divine revelation to himself, an angel appearing to him in a dream, and bidding him accept his wife. This ended his doubt ; the public marriage ceremonies (if they were not already concluded) were no longer delayed, and he made no further protest against the situation thus thrust upon him. He " took unto him his wife," but the narrative adds, to avoid any possibility of it being thought that Joseph could have been

¹ Matt. i. 19.

² Matt. i. 20.

³ For the strict law see Deuteronomy xxii. 13-21.

the father of our Lord, that Mary remained his wife in outward appearance only, and the continuance of this arrangement is vouched for during the whole time up to the birth of her Son.¹

At this point we revert to Saint Luke's narrative.² Some time before this the Emperor Augustus had issued orders for a census to be taken of the inhabitants of his whole empire, and the moment had now arrived for King Herod to obey the command and furnish a return for his dominions, which were of course part of the Roman Empire. This census, as Saint Luke implies,³ and we know from secular sources also, was a periodical device, recurring every fourteen years.⁴ But the present was the first of the series. Moreover evidence has recently been brought to light which shows that for the purposes of this census the whole population, male and female, at any rate in certain parts of the Empire in the Eastern Mediterranean, was required to submit to registration, not at the place where a person might have gone to settle, but at the proper home to which he originally belonged.⁵ There were reasons for this regulation into which we do not need to enter. But it is of some interest to remember that the principle of compelling people to return to their proper district for registration seems to have been applied as early as 95 B.C. in Italy under the provision of the *lex Licinia Mucia*.⁶ In accordance then with the requirement of the Roman census Joseph with Mary left Nazareth and travelled up to Bethlehem, Joseph's native city, to be enrolled. This measure served the useful purpose, for which provision must have been found in any case by Joseph, of avoiding the scandal which would otherwise have been occasioned by the birth of Mary's Child so soon after her marriage, since it will be recalled that she spent at least three

¹ Matt. i. 18-25. The same fact is probably implied by the use of the term "betrothed" in Luke ii. 5.

² Luke ii

³ Luke ii. 2.

⁴ Ramsay, *Recent Discovery*, pp. 255 seqq.

⁵ Id. ib. pp. 259 seqq.

⁶ See e.g. Greenidge and Clay, *Sources for Roman History*, pp. 92, 93.

months after the Annunciation with Elizabeth, and all Nazareth would remember the wedding celebrated after her return.

This consideration makes it highly probable that the Holy Family intended, at least for a time, to settle at Bethlehem instead of returning immediately to Nazareth. Accordingly it is worth remarking that Matthew never says where Joseph and Mary had their home, though he mentions Bethlehem later on as the place of Christ's birth. As a matter of fact it is not until he comes to treat of the visit of the Magi that he mentions any place in connexion with the Holy Family at all, and then he only does so in a parenthesis in order to explain the geography of the Wise Men's journey.¹ But he certainly does seem to regard Joseph and Mary as domiciled in Bethlehem at the period of that visit, and this would be very naturally explained by the argument advanced above.

While Joseph and Mary were at Bethlehem Christ was born. This must have happened soon after their arrival, because they were not in a house but a stable, of which the manger served as cradle. The presence of such a crowd as to fill the inn has been put down to the exigencies of the census, but Prof. Box denies the possibility of this: "It is not probable," he writes "that there was any great movement of population throughout Palestine in consequence of the enrolment."² But Saint Luke certainly writes as if there was a good deal of movement: "all were journeying (ἐπορεύοντο πάντες) to enrol themselves, each one to his own city."³ It may, however, be possible that the crowd was increased by the coincidence, accidental or designed, of some feast with the enrolment; or indeed the truth may be that there was no special crowd present at all, but that a clean stable was offered to the mother as affording her the most convenient privacy and comfort; we should then translate "there was no place (instead of 'no room') for them in the inn."⁴ But the last suggestion is improbable, on more grounds than one.

¹ Matt. ii. 1.

² *The Virgin Birth of Jesus*, p. 59.

³ Luke ii. 3.

⁴ Luke ii. 7. The Greek is οὐκ ἦν αὐτοῖς τόπος.

In the night of Christ's birth¹ the wonderful and special character of the event was recognized through revelation by the shepherds. On the eighth day the child was circumcised and received the special name Jesus in accordance with instructions given beforehand both to Joseph and to Mary.² On the fortieth day the further ceremonies of redemption of the child (being the first-born of his mother) and the purification of Mary, both required by Jewish law, were undertaken: although it was not necessary that either mother or child should be present, advantage was taken of the occasion for them both to visit the Temple, and for the child to be presented in a special manner to the Lord, as had been done with the infant Samuel centuries before.³

The next incident recorded is to be found in Matthew. Astrologers from the East, who had been led in this instance through their false science to the truth, arrived at Jerusalem to pay their respects to the Child whose birth they had inferred, and were directed from a consideration of the Old Testament to Bethlehem. The reappearance of the celestial phenomenon which had attracted their attention in the first instance proved the means of guiding them to the place where Jesus lay, which was apparently no longer the stable but a house.⁵ But this visit had aroused the suspicions of the jealous and bloodthirsty Herod, who murdered at least three of his own sons during the last three years of his life, a measure which is said to have caused his patron Augustus to remark punningly that it was better to be Herod's sow than Herod's son.⁶ The Jewish ruler was now old and so morbidly afraid of plots that almost a reign of terror was in progress. Hearing from the Wise Men that the Infant of whom they were in search was "born King of the Jews" this father of his people formed the purpose of destroying Him; and when the Wise

¹ Luke ii. 8-20. For the date, Luke ii. 11.

² Luke i. 31, ii. 21, Matt. i. 21.

³ Luke ii. 22-24, and Box thereon, *Virgin Birth of Jesus*, pp. 88-100. 1 Samuel i. 24-28.

⁴ Matt. ii.

⁵ Matt. ii. 11.

⁶ No doubt the remark was originally made in Greek, ἀμεινον ὄν εἶναι ἢ υἱόν.

Men failed to spy for him he murdered all the children of Bethlehem under two years of age, thinking that if he cast his net wide enough he would be bound to catch the one of whom he entertained suspicion. But Joseph, having been warned in a dream, had fled with the Holy Family to Egypt, which had for generations provided the obvious refuge for Jewish exiles. When not a great time later¹ Herod died, in 4 B.C., Joseph was once more warned to return to the land of Israel. But on his arrival he heard that Archelaus, one of Herod's sons whose tyranny after about nine years' rule was too great even for the Romans to endure longer, was governing Judaea. Joseph was justly afraid to enter his dominions, and accordingly travelled north again to Nazareth in Galilee, which was now separated from Judaea and under the rule of another of Herod's sons, named Antipas.

There is one difficulty in this section of the narrative, which is not serious, judged by the standard of difficulty involved in compiling the history of Rome for this period, but has caused some trouble nevertheless. That is, the negative difficulty that Saint Luke makes no mention of the journey into Egypt, and speaks as if the Holy Family never intended to settle permanently at Bethlehem, but returned after the Presentation in the Temple to Nazareth. Matthew, on the other hand, when he mentions the return to Nazareth speaks as if the settlement there were accidental. But this need involve no more than that Saint Luke was ignorant of the Flight, or for some reason, of space (his is the longest of the four gospels) or judgment, did not choose to insert an account of it in his work. Both evangelists are true to facts; but Saint Luke describes them as they actually turned out, while Matthew gives them from the point of view of the intentions Joseph formed before events occurred to modify his plans. It was the case that the Holy Family accomplished all that the Jewish law demanded, and afterwards returned to Nazareth.² It was also no doubt the case that they might have continued to dwell at Bethlehem had not Herod made that course impossible for them to carry out.³ Joseph made plans which Herod's conduct deranged, and this derange-

¹ See below.

² Luke ii. 39.

³ Cf. Matt. ii. 1, 13, 21-22.

ment is reflected in the varying tone of our two authorities.

There is a good reason for Matthew to have emphasized the significance of the settlement at Nazareth.¹ We have seen above that he does not attach great importance to place-names as a rule, and only mentions parenthetically that Bethlehem was Christ's birthplace after he has narrated the birth and naming of our Lord. So the fact that Nazareth has not been mentioned till the return from Egypt is not remarkable: in any case it is Christ's history that he is narrating, and Christ had never been within scores of miles of Nazareth before. But now the story takes our Lord to a district and a town which are of the first importance for His subsequent life. Born, as both authorities agree, at Bethlehem, He now first came to dwell in the Galilean village which was for so many years to be His home, in the district which was destined to be the scene of His longest and most characteristic and in some ways most successful work. That is the thought which underlies the careful emphasis laid by Matthew on the mention of the place; and he marks the true significance of the event by the quotation of an obscure and untraced prophecy that "he shall be called a Nazarean."

The question of the dating of the Nativity with reference to Luke ii. 2, can only be very summarily treated. Tertullian² states that our Lord was born during the census taken by Sentius Saturninus, who was legatus of the province of Syria apparently from 9 B.C. to 6 B.C. Saint Luke says that the enrolment took place during the governorship of Quirinius, who held an independent military command in the same province for a period somewhere about 10-6 B.C. So that there is no discrepancy here: the term used by Saint Luke for "governor" is quite a general one, and anyhow the official title of both "governors" would be precisely the same, "legatus Augusti pro praetore," and Saint Luke chose to date his story by the name of the more distinguished man. The normal year for the periodic census would have been 9-8 B.C., the enrolment probably being taken at the end of it; but Professor Ramsay gives some plausible reasons for supposing it possible, if not probable, that the census was delayed somewhat in Herod's

¹ Matt. ii. 23.

² *Adv. Marc.* iv. 19.

dependent kingdom.¹ It may have taken place there as late as 7-6 B.C. In that case it is interesting to remember that Christ would have been twelve years old at the time of the next census in A.D. 6-7. Now when Christ was twelve years old we are told that he came up to Jerusalem for the feast of the Passover, which his parents had been in the habit of attending annually.² Jewish boys were not required to attend until they were thirteen: it is true that they sometimes did attend before that age, but there was no obligation upon them to do so.³ Hence if our Lord was born in the year 7-6 B.C. (the census in Palestine having been delayed something less than two years after that in the neighbouring province of Syria), and if the census of A.D. 6-7 were held about the Passover of A.D. 7, we are furnished with an additional reason for his making the journey to Jerusalem on that particular occasion.⁴ It is highly probable that the actual enumeration under the second census may have fallen about that time. It would tend, if anything, to be late, since in A.D. 6 Archelaus was deposed and Judaea was placed under a procurator; the property valuation which was ordered in consequence of Judaea being constituted a province met with opposition, the country was disturbed, and the enforcement of the valuation even led to some degree of armed resistance. And in quite normal circumstances the enrolments of the population seem to have been made at the end of the periodic years, so as to include the children born in those years. If this hypothesis were correct, Jesus would have

¹ *Was Christ born at Bethlehem?* pp. 178-185.

² Luke ii. 41 seqq.

³ Edersheim, *Life and Times* i. p. 235.

⁴ As enrolment papers discovered in Egypt show, at each census the children were enrolled who had been born since the last census. As the Roman poll-tax was levied on males of fourteen years, this would secure that at each enrolment those would be included who would become liable to the tax between that census and the next, the enrolments being made every fourteen years. The poll-tax began to be levied in Judaea when that country was taken from its native rulers and made a procuratorship, i.e. from A.D. 6. But it must of course be remembered that the enrolment served several other purposes besides that of deciding liability to pay the poll-tax; and there is other evidence of its being held in subject kingdoms under their own princes.

been born at some date after the Passover of 7 B.C. and before the Passover of 6 B.C. The Flight into Egypt might then be put somewhat less than two years later, since Herod killed the children up to but not over that age. This brings us at least to the end of 6 B.C., and possibly to the end of 5 B.C. Herod died before the Passover of 4 B.C., so in the latter case the stay in Egypt could only have lasted for a few weeks.

It is not contended that this reconstruction of the history lacks a due proportion of hypothesis or that all is certainty in these matters. That is and must be very far from being the case. But we maintain that our account is less hypothetical than frequently is perforce the case with secular history; that our hypotheses are better as such than those advanced by our opponents; and that hypothesis has no place whatever in the statement of the central facts, for as to them there is neither wavering nor obscurity in the sources. In the following points both accounts are absolutely clear: Christ was miraculously born at Bethlehem, of a virgin named Mary, the nominal wife of a man called Joseph; and at some time afterwards was taken to live at Nazareth. The divergence between the two authorities lies in the relation of the attendant circumstances; but even here the difference, such as it is, is solely one of mutual omission, not of inconsistency. The only approximation to a contradiction is when Saint Luke (ii. 39) seems to imply a direct return to Nazareth at the point where Matthew inserts the journey into Egypt; and nothing more serious is involved than disregard on Saint Luke's part of what was comparatively an unimportant sojourn beyond the borders of the Holy Land.

In support of the pretensions which may seem to have been somewhat arrogantly advanced on behalf of the superiority of our hypotheses, it is only just to illustrate the kind of argument upon which our adversaries rely. They say that the "two versions" of the Annunciation are incompatible with one another. This would be perfectly true if there were two versions of the Annunciation preserved in our sources, if in fact the revelation to Joseph were a variant account of the annunciation to Mary. But that is not the case, and no reason is given for so

regarding it. Manifestly in the gospels two distinct events are being recorded, taking place at an interval of several months : it is a monstrous and gross assumption to assert that they are different versions of the same occurrence. They are totally distinguished both in time, in persons, in manner, and in content. Or again it is remarked that in Matthew's gospel Joseph has revelations made him in dream-visions, and that in Saint Luke's gospel Mary and Zacharias have them made in waking-visions ; and it is inferred that one or both of the evangelists is reporting myths. But it is outrageous for an historical critic to assume that visions must always be depicted as occurring in one way. There may be any number of reasons why in the divine providence one method should have been employed in one person's case and the other in dealing with a second. Besides, it is not true that all the visions reported by Saint Luke are waking-visions. Saint Luke wrote Acts as well as the gospel, and in Acts there are several instances of dream-visions recorded, as well as some of the waking kind.¹ The real objection of this critic is of course to visions in general ; but that is not an historical objection, and his mind was prejudiced upon that subject before he even started to consider the purely historical evidence for the particular case. Whatever value we may therefore attach to his philosophical prepossessions we shall allow none to his historical criticism.

It is equally unreasonable to require that each evangelist should have been acquainted with all the stories furnished by the other. No doubt their joint record contains not a tithe of the stories which might have been preserved about Christ's infancy and boyhood. One of the most striking facts about the gospels, and indeed about the whole body of writings contained in the New Testament, is the smallness of their contribution to knowledge of the life of Christ. About this period of his life in particular each evangelist tells us so little that it would be strange indeed to find their information overlapping except by reason of

¹ Acts xvi. 9, xviii. 9, xxiii. 11, xxvii. 23, sleeping ; Acts i. 10, x. 3, xii. 7, waking ; Acts ix. 10, doubtful. From this it would seem that Saint Paul was especially prone to receive visions during sleep, all the four to which reference is given having occurred to him.

their using common sources ; and that, for the period of the Birth and Infancy they manifestly have not done. And yet their witness is consistent, and their adherence to the essence of the matter is unwavering. In brief, their independence is of great importance and their divergence is not. On any theory the fact of the Virgin Birth was at first an intimate secret, preserved, as we should say, in the inmost circles of those who had known Christ after the flesh. If the Matthaean account was in the keeping of the "brethren" of the Lord it may well have been withheld from publication during most or all of the lifetime of Saint James, and thus escaped the researches of Saint Luke ; or again Saint Luke may have refrained deliberately from using it, and thereby breaking the wonderful harmony and unity of the other Birth narrative in his possession. Similarly Matthew may have secured in Jerusalem a documentary source containing his account without ever coming into contact with the women of Galilee who would seem to have been likely depositories of the Lucan stories.

To say then that "our two traditions mutually exclude each other"¹ is absurd. It is only surpassed by the statement that individually "each of [the two documents] is seriously compromised."² The truth is that neither of them has received from the results of historical research anything but confirmation.

NOTE ON THE GENEALOGIES

There seems to be little doubt that the two genealogies are independent attempts to reproduce the descent of Saint Joseph. The old view that the Lucan tree represented the genealogy of Mary is now discredited, though this does not necessarily mean that Mary was not of the house of David : authorities for this tradition appear early in the persons of Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, and in the *Protevangelium Jacobi*.

Saint Luke states expressly that his genealogy is applied putatively to Christ, who was only "as it was thought the son of Joseph." This genealogy seems to supply the actual line of Saint Joseph's descent back to David, as far as it could be ascertained, and gives the traditional names for the earlier

¹ Lobstein, *Virgin Birth of Christ*, E.T., p. 44.

² Id. ib. p. 45.

period. The names of the ancestors of Abraham are apparently furnished by the Septuagint version of 1 Chronicles i, though, from the forms Arni and Admin, and the statement that Zerubbabel was the son rather than the nephew of Shealtiel, it appears that a different source was used for the rest of the list. As if to hint that Christ is the second Adam the line is traced back to the first Adam.

Matthew also words his genealogy so as to make it clear that he is not attributing to Christ physical descent from the persons named in his table. He traces back the succession of Christ, the King of the true Israel, to Abraham, the Father of the Israel after the flesh. It is in keeping with this motive that he reckons each generation not by physical descent at all, but by the royal succession. Furthermore the whole is compressed into an artificial numerical scheme, which causes the omission of names which should properly have been included. The result is that time and again the sense of the verb "begat" must be interpreted legally and not physically. To begin with, only thirteen generations are allowed for the six hundred years between Jehoiachin and Christ. Then three generations are omitted between Joram and Uzziah, although the kings of Judah must have been, to put it mildly, as familiar to every Jew as are the sovereigns of England to the modern British child. Finally, Jehoiachin apparently did not beget Shealtiel in the literal sense, since Jeremiah calls the former childless; nor did Shealtiel beget Zerubbabel, for he was his uncle, as we learn from 1 Chronicles iii; nor did Zerubbabel beget Ab-iud (the name is the same as the Lucan Jud-a), but at least one generation is omitted.¹ In view of this accumulated evidence the reason is not far to seek for the divergence of the Matthaean from the Lucan genealogy: the former traces deliberately a putative line of succession throughout, the latter only in the first degree of the ascent.

It is impossible to forbear quoting the following passage from Professor Burkitt's notes on page 260 of the second volume of the *Evangelion da-Mepharreshe* in illustration of the feeling that underlies the insertion of the genealogies: "The position taken up by the Evangelist [Matthew] seems as logical as the necessities of the case allowed. If the Messiah be the son of no earthly father and at the same time the legitimate heir of David, it is difficult to see what else he could have said. That the Messiah should be merely a son of David was not

¹ See an interesting discussion in Dr. Plummer's *Luke*, p. 104, (on Luke iii. 27).

enough. There were doubtless many sons of David alive at the time ; but the Evangelist wanted the legitimate Heir of the divine promises made to David. That the infant Jesus was the legitimate Heir was proved for Matthew by the miracles which were performed on His behalf and by the prophecies which were at once fulfilled by the circumstances of His childhood. The points which Matthew wishes to impress on his readers are the *physical reality* of the birth of Christ from a virgin and the *legality* of the descent from David. The physical reality of the descent from David was, as I understand him, a matter of no moment so long as the legal conditions were satisfied." A similar motive to that which led Matthew to insert his genealogy no doubt was operative in Saint Luke's mind also.

V

THE SILENCE OF SAINT PAUL, SAINT MARK, AND
SAINT JOHN; AND THE TESTIMONY OF THE
SECOND CENTURY

IT has formed the subject of strong reproach to the defenders of the Catholic doctrine that the Virgin Birth is only taught explicitly in two books of the New Testament, and more specifically that Saint Paul, Saint Mark, and Saint John, who should all have been acquainted with the fact if it were true, fail to show any sign that they had ever heard of it. To meet this charge we shall endeavour to show sufficient reason to account for the silence of these three saints, and to point out at the same time any indications there may be that their literary silence on the subject, however else to be explained, was not due to ignorance.

Let us take the case of Saint Paul first. There is no doubt that for many years after his conversion the Virgin Birth was not much spoken about by those who knew of it: the wisdom of their silence was shown later when Jewish malice seized upon the widespread preaching of the doctrine to invent scandals of a horrible description to oppose it. The Church in its early days, when those were still living for whom the question would have had a particularly painful personal bearing, was well spared the strain of controversy upon such a subject. This silence was maintained, so far as our evidence goes, until the publication of our first and third gospels: that is to say, if we agree even to the earliest dates assigned to these documents, until Saint Paul had written all his extant epistles, with the exception of the pastorals and possibly

also of the epistles of the Captivity (Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians, and Philemon). It is not, therefore, really surprising that Saint Paul in his written works maintained this silence. At any rate he was not singular in refraining from overt mention of the Virgin Birth.

In the second place we need to consider the character and purpose of Saint Paul's letters. They are in no sense historical, and for the most part not dogmatic, treatises: they are occasional letters thrown off usually at white heat by a man of very high-strung temperament to meet particular difficulties and problems as they arose. They are, in fact, largely, though not entirely, concerned with practical questions. They make comparatively little attempt to perfect a complete theological system, and contain little elementary instruction in the facts of what Christ did for us while yet with us on earth: the latter, as the epistles themselves inform us,¹ had been committed to the converts orally, the former was too "strong meat"² for the whole general body of Christians to assimilate very quickly. Theological attention is mainly devoted to the problems of Jewish apostasy, to the coherence of the Church in Christ, and to the resurrection of the dead at the last day: there is no discussion of the two problems for which the Virgin Birth is peculiarly important, since it is taken as axiomatic both that Christ's Person was pre-existent and that his Humanity was sinless. The philosophical difficulties in connexion with these matters and with the meaning of an incarnation at all did not arise until very much later. When, therefore, we find no explicit reference to the Virgin Birth we are neither more nor less astonished than we are at the discovery that the Galilean ministry is not mentioned, and that such names as Nazareth, Bethlehem, Capernaum, and Bethsaida do not occur in any of Saint Paul's epistles. It cannot justly be said in either case that silence is a proof of ignorance.

In the third place it is most improbable that a fact of such importance as the Virgin Birth, if known to Saint Paul's companion and attendant Saint Luke, was unknown to Saint Paul himself. Professor Harnack is not ready to

¹ 1 Cor. xi. 23, xv. 1-4.

² 1 Cor. ii. and iii. 1-2.

face the possibility that the Apostle may have heard of the doctrine of the Virgin Birth, but he insists on the beloved physician's belief in it, and that at the very date at which for years the two had been constant companions, in travel, at Caesarea, and at Rome.¹ The thing is incredible: his argument defeats itself. We may add that Saint Paul emphatically and clearly teaches the pre-existence of Christ² and his Incarnation,³ and that the distinction drawn between belief in these doctrines and in the miraculous birth is one for which there is no evidence in early times. The early heretics who denied the Virgin Birth all denied also the Incarnation, and it was the latter doctrine against which their revolt was primarily directed. This may be illustrated by the fact that certain of them⁴ accepted the idea of the Virgin Birth while rejecting that of the Incarnation. The opposite tendency found no manifestation in early Christian history. It is a much more modern heresy which asserts the possibility of the Incarnation having taken place without the Virgin Birth. It is therefore not unnatural to suppose that when Saint Paul refers to Christ's birth without mentioning Saint Joseph he has the Virgin Birth in mind: his purpose is to emphasize the true humanity of Christ, and a reference to the father of our Lord (as he mentions elsewhere the Lord's "brethren") would have helped to clinch the argument, had it been permissible. Instead of this, however, he simply says, "God sent forth his Son, born of woman,"⁵ an expression perfectly in keeping with belief in the virginity of Christ's mother.

We may now deal with the silence of Saint Mark. His gospel does not purport to be a life of Christ, and his interest is not, like that of Saint Luke, centred in the purely historical figure of our Lord as such. What he has to tell us is the Gospel: "the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ" is how he heads his book. He feels the need of answering the question which no doubt would arise, "This

¹ *Date of Acts*, pp. 144, 155.

² Col. i. 15-17.

³ Rom. viii. 3, Gal. iv. 4.

⁴ E.g. Theodotus "the currier," for whom see Duchesne, *Early History of the Church* i. p. 217.

⁵ Gal. iv. 4.

Jesus whom you preach, what work did he do for my salvation that I should accept him for my Lord?" And so Saint Mark begins his book with the first preaching of the good news of salvation, which began with Saint John the Baptist in Judaea. Then in five verses he dismisses the biographical details of the Baptism and Temptation, and overlooking any further notice of the ministry in which Christ failed to accomplish outward results he hastens on to describe the positive work of healing and salvation that Jesus did carry out successfully for men's souls and bodies, and above all, the culmination of his mission on the cross, which is described at great length in proportion to the rest of the book. The only section of Christ's teaching reported at length by Saint Mark (chapter xiii) has to do with the subject, closely bound up with salvation, of persecution, judgment, and the end of the world. There is no room in the book for anything so irrelevant to the main purpose of his scheme as a description of Christ's childhood or an exposition of the nature of his birth. So the silence which was still being maintained upon the latter subject at the time he wrote was respected by our earliest evangelist and left to be broken in due course by other writers.

Again, it needs to be remarked that Saint Mark is the only one of the four evangelists who does not mention Saint Joseph. He does not even indirectly refer to him. Christ's mother and his "brethren" have their place, but his "father" might never have existed. This is the more striking since in the passages of the first and third gospels which present a parallel to that in which Saint Mark names the Lord's "brethren" the "father" of the Lord is also mentioned. The other two evangelists, each in different terms, represent the Jews as calling Christ the son of Joseph. But in place of their expressions, "Is not this the carpenter's son?" or "Is not this the son of Joseph?" Saint Mark writes simply, "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary?"¹ He seems to have gone out of his way to avoid ascribing a human father to our Lord.

The silence of Saint Mark is then no more to be taken as a proof that he was ignorant or contemptuous of the

¹ Mark vi. 3; Matt. xiii. 55; Luke iv. 22.

doctrine than is that of Saint Paul. It is to be explained by the consideration of the scope of his work. We are informed in the very early and credible tradition of Papias that this gospel represents the teaching of Saint Peter. There can at least be little doubt that its contents roughly correspond to what the Apostles preached. They were concerned with the good news of the salvation wrought by Christ, with the concrete evidence of deeds done for human bodies, minds and spirits. The speeches recorded in Acts corroborate this : the Apostles are there displayed speaking of Him Who went about doing good, through Whose name those that believed on Him should receive remission of sins ;¹ or as Saint Mark would have us say, Who came not to be ministered unto but to minister and to give His life a ransom for many.² The Virgin Birth was not the first subject upon which a missionary would pitch to speak of in the first century any more than in the twentieth ; yet Saint Mark's work would seem to have lain in giving the substance of the earliest mission preaching. Once again then it should occasion no more surprise that Saint Mark is silent about the Virgin Birth than that Saint Luke, who indisputably believed it, does not refer to it from the beginning of chapter iv. in his gospel to the end of Acts. For that is equally the fact.

We come next to Saint John. If it were desired to find a short descriptive title for his gospel it might well be called " the Challenge " : it is a record of claim and counter-claim, of personal requirements demanded, rejected, and satisfied. Individual history treated merely for its own sake is once more outside the scope of the work. There is no necessity for introducing the Virgin Birth explicitly, since Christ never made it the subject of a challenge to the world, and never publicly based His claims upon it : He said He was the Son of Man and the Son of God, and both these claims are adequately represented by Saint John in his account ; but the manner in which the Sonship was exemplified by the miraculous conception and birth forms a subject outside the immediate scope of the fourth gospel. Again, the essence of the testimony of this evangelist is that it professes to be a record of what he himself

¹ Acts x. 38, 43.

² Mark x. 45.

had seen and heard. "He that hath seen hath borne witness" is the keynote of the book. But the Birth of Christ obviously took place at a time anterior to the recollection of the disciple whom He loved; and that in itself is enough to bar it out of the record.

In the second place it is possible to point out other facts or events of which the evangelist was cognizant but did not treat in his gospel. It is widely admitted that the author of the fourth gospel was well acquainted with the contents of the Synoptic gospels; indeed it would be exceptionally difficult to maintain the contrary opinion. But if we are prepared to allow his knowledge of those documents, there is in them at once a great mass of material which he obviously disregarded, not as being false (such a sweeping condemnation would be nothing short of ludicrous), but as irrelevant or unnecessary to his purpose. Even apart from this general consideration of his acquaintance with the Synoptic gospels, there are several clear cases in which his own gospel implies the knowledge of what he fails to record. For instance, he mentions in the most casual way a body called the "Twelve" which Jesus had "chosen"¹; but he never relates their appointment and nowhere gives all their names. Again, the discourse to Nicodemus clearly treats of baptism, as the discourse in the synagogue at Capernaum clearly relates to the Eucharist.² Indeed the recognition of the true significance of these discourses has furnished Protestant writers with an argument against the historical character of the fourth gospel. But yet the evangelist absolutely neglects the opportunities afforded him by the description of a Galilean Appearance and of the Maundy for inserting accounts of the institution of baptism and the Eucharist. Again he alludes in passing to the end of Saint John the Baptist's career: "John was baptizing at Aenon . . . for he was not yet cast into prison"³; but does not relate it in detail. And though he reproduces the testimony of the Baptist to Him Who coming after him should baptize with the Holy Ghost, and the story of the descent of the Holy Dove

¹ John vi. 67, 70.

² John iii. 3 seqq., vi. 32 seqq., 41, 48 seqq. 52 seqq.

³ John iii. 23, 24.

upon our Lord, which as we know took place at the Baptism of Christ, he still indulges his peculiar mannerism of a speaking silence and forbears to say that Jesus ever was baptized.¹ Finally, although in chapter xix, verse 25, Saint John gives a list of those who were standing at the foot of the cross, we find in the very next verse a further person present, "the disciple whom He loved," who was not mentioned in the catalogue.

These facts render highly improbable the theory held by some writers that Saint John puts forward his doctrine of the Incarnation as an alternative to the doctrine of the Virgin Birth. It would be antecedently much more likely that once more he is employing a speaking silence, and that his statement of the Incarnation, which after all goes hardly any further than the statement of it to be gathered from different passages in the writings of Saint Paul,² is meant not to supersede but to explain the Virgin Birth. And when we look into the matter it is hard to see how the two doctrines could be regarded as alternatives. The Virgin Birth means nothing in itself: it is only significant when taken as the outward sign of an Incarnation. And as we have said above, there is no evidence of the separation of the two ideas in ancient times, once a belief is granted in the Incarnation, while there is considerable evidence of their having been connected. On the other hand, there is nothing whatever in Saint John's prologue that is in the least degree inconsistent with the Virgin Birth; and there is in fact a statement which it was madness to include if the author really wished to convince his readers that the idea of the Virgin Birth was false.

This sentence is comprised in the famous verse thirteen of the first chapter, "who were begotten not of bloods nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of a man, but of God." We have in an earlier notice had reason to reject the variant reading in this verse which makes the whole sentence apply not to Christians but to Christ. But though the singular reading is corrupt the instinct was a perfectly true one which prompted certain early Fathers to accept the corruption. This case provides another instance of the speaking silence of Saint John. He took

¹ John i. 30 seqq. ² E.g. Col. i. 15 seqq., Gal. iv. 4, 2 Cor. v. 16.

words which, as those early Fathers recognized, could only be applied in their literal sense to Christ, and by a bold paradox (it is nothing else, on any theory), he used them to describe the new and spiritual birth of those who accepted Christ's claims. They were born again, he would say, of water and the Spirit, they were members of Christ and sons of God, they were Jesus' own spiritual brethren: not of bloods; that is, in a spiritual way, not a physical: nor of the will of the flesh; that is, supernaturally and not naturally: nor of the will of a man; that is, by God's dispensation and not by human purpose: in short, by the operation of precisely the same principles that governed the Incarnation, which is the basis of man's salvation. And so he seems to rest not only the Incarnation but also the fulfilment of the age-long mission of the Incarnate Christ upon the truth of the Virgin Birth.

It may be concluded that had the author of this gospel wished to attack the doctrine of the Virgin Birth he would have found some more perspicuous means of doing so. Nor is there wanting another piece of evidence to indicate his views. In chapter vii, verse 42, he represents the Jews as saying with reference to the possibility of our Lord being the Messiah, "Hath not the scripture said that the Christ cometh of the seed of David and from the village of Bethlehem?" Now it has been pointed out that there are here two objections to Christ's claims: that he was not of David's line, and that he did not come from Bethlehem. The first is recorded by Saint John in a spirit of irony: he knew that Jesus did come of David's line; not even the Jews themselves were able finally to maintain the contrary. But that being so it seems to follow that the rest of the sentence, containing the second objection, must have been thought worthy of insertion for a like reason: the writer ironically records the Jewish cavil at our Lord's home having been at Nazareth because he knew all the time that Christ had really been born at Bethlehem, as the Jews said the Messiah should be. It is also remarkable that Saint John applies against Judaea the moral of a saying of Christ about his "own country," although as originally uttered by our Lord it referred to Nazareth.¹ This means that

¹ John iv. 44: cf. Mark vi. 4.

Saint John accepted the fact of the Birth at Bethlehem. But the authorities for the Birth at Bethlehem are precisely those who tell us that it was a Virgin Birth. These two features of the story are connected in our documents: no contrary account has survived to our day, and there is no evidence that any such was ever current in the days of Saint John.

In fact, if it is unlikely that Saint Paul can have been ignorant of the Virgin Birth, it is incredible that Saint John was, writing as he did more than thirty years later. Be it noted that we have laid no stress upon the Johannine authorship of the fourth gospel: so far as the present argument goes the book may have been written by the Apostle or by another, and the name "Saint John" may be regarded as a mere title for the author, if it is so preferred. We may perhaps, however, be allowed to build an argument upon the generally accepted view that Ephesus was the place in which the gospel was composed. Now if it was written after the end of the first century, its author must have been fully in agreement with this doctrine, for Ignatius, penning a letter to the Ephesians about A.D. 110, assumes it as a fundamental axiom of Christianity.¹ But if it was written before the end of the century, there is another special circumstance connected with Ephesus to be taken into account. We know on the authority of Saint Polycarp of Smyrna, quoted by Saint Irenaeus, that Saint John was there subjected to the opposition of the heretic Cerinthus.² Now Cerinthus denied both the Incarnation and the Virgin Birth. The fourth gospel affirms as strongly as can be the truth of the Incarnation. But it would seem to be quite impossible for the author of an Ephesian document such as this gospel is, with the knowledge that throughout Asia Cerinthus had been recently engaged in coupling the Incarnation and the Virgin Birth in his denial of the faith,³ to have insisted so emphatically upon the truth of the one doctrine without taking steps to make clear his disbelief in the other, had he disbelieved it. Yet he took no such steps, and the inference is that as he must certainly have heard of both doctrines, so he

¹ *Ad. Eph.* xix.

³ *Iren.* I, xxi.

² *Iren., Adv. Haer.* III, iii. 4.

believed them both, the one in his eyes furnishing but the outward circumstance, and the other but the hidden rationale, of a single fact.

It has therefore not been proved that either Saint Paul or Saint Mark or Saint John wrote in ignorance of the doctrine of the Virgin Birth, still less that any of them was ranged in opposition to it: in fact the indications given in their writings go to prove the contrary. The weight of general probability can be thrown into the same scale. For if any further proof were needed that no person of authority was ever found to take his stand against the doctrine, it might be deduced from the following facts. "At the end of the first century, or at least the beginning of the second century,"¹ belief in the Virgin Birth was practically universal among Christians; and among heretics there is no sign of any apostolic or similar authority being quoted in support of the naturalistic view.

On the former point there is practically nothing to add to the section on the subject in Dr. Gore's essay.² He has there collected the evidence of Irenaeus, witnessing to the faith of Asia, Gaul, and Rome; of Tertullian, witnessing to that of Africa and Rome; of Justin Martyr, of Ephesus and Rome; of Ignatius, witnessing to the faith of Syria and Asia; and of Aristides of Athens. He also quotes on behalf of the Church of Alexandria the later evidence of Clement and Origen, of whom the latter, a searching scholar by no means trammelled with the bands of an overmastering orthodoxy, claims that the Virgin Birth formed part of the apostolic teaching handed down from the beginning. To this list we may add the Protevangelium of James. In all these authorities, whose works comprise a preponderating proportion of extant Christian literature belonging to the second century, the Virgin Birth is taught so clearly and explicitly, and with such unruffled confidence, that the doctrine manifestly was not thought capable of contradiction by a Christian. Not a breath of doubt troubles the conscience of the Fathers on the subject. They knew that everywhere the doctrine was accepted: as Irenaeus says, "Neither those Churches which have been founded in Germany have believed other-

¹ Harnack, *Date of Acts*, p. 148.

² *Dissertations*, pp. 41 seqq.

wise or teach otherwise, nor those in Spain, nor in Gaul, nor in the East, nor in Egypt, nor in Libya, nor those established in the central region of the world."¹ For Syria, Asia, Greece, and Italy the evidence which is adduced above belongs definitely to the first half of the second century. It is impossible in the face of this to deny either the early or the universal character of the belief; and it is inconceivable that any one so prominent and influential as either Saint John or Saint Paul could ever have set his face against the doctrine when he met it without some echo of his protest having been transmitted to the ears of one or other of the second century Fathers.

There certainly did exist in the second century a few heretical or inchoate Christians who denied the Virgin Birth together with the Incarnation and other articles of the faith; but not even among them does definite apostolic authority seem to have been claimed for their view. We are not referring to the various Gnostic sects, since no one ever thinks their teaching to be based on historical tradition, and they were soon universally recognized as holding alien doctrines subversive of Christianity and were repudiated by Christians on every side. But there did exist heretics of a different kind. These were the Ebionites. The name is first used by Irenaeus, but no doubt the people were the same as those to whom Justin refers about the middle of the second century. "There are certain of our race [i.e. Christians] who confess that He was Messiah but declare Him to have been a man born of men."²

The words just quoted admirably summarize the position of the "Pharisaic" Ebionites, as those are called whose views were still unmodified by Gnostic accretions. Their general attitude was Jewish, but they accepted a warped kind of Christianity as an incrustation on their Judaism. They confessed that Jesus was a prophet, was even The Prophet; but they denied alike His pre-existence and His divinity. Now it is sometimes assumed that these people are to be accounted simply as the Remnant of the original Christian Church who remained untouched by the pernicious growth of legend which everywhere, it is assumed, so quickly

¹ Ed. Harvey, I, p. 92, 93, cf. 91 init.

² *Dial. con. Tryph.* 48.

overspread the faith : their rejection of the Virgin Birth is consequently claimed as proof that this was not included in the primitive dogmatic groundwork of the Church. But there is another view of the subject which has more to commend it, namely, that the position of the Ebionites resulted not from a rooted adherence to primitive doctrine, but from a gradual retrogression under Jewish influence. That this is the case might be inferred from Justin's words in continuation of the passage quoted above. He states that in no case could he agree with the Ebionites, "because we have been bidden by Christ Himself not to believe the teachings of men but the things preached by the blessed prophets and taught by Him." That is to say, Justin claims for the Incarnation and with it for the Virgin Birth (both of which the Ebionites denied) the authority of Christ and the prophets ; but the Ebionites apparently could claim no better authority for their beliefs than that of the innovating humanitarian tendencies of decadent Judaic Christianity. They had only the authority of men, and were opposing themselves to the revelation of God preserved in the general tradition of the Church.

In thorough keeping with this is the statement derived through Eusebius from Hegesippus that the Palestinian Church was till the time of Trajan "a virgin pure and undefiled," "since those," adds Eusebius, "who tried to corrupt the sound rule of the saving preaching, if indeed any such people existed, were then still lurking darkly in secret."¹ This means, as Dr. Gore points out, that about this time antagonism began to be apparent between Christians in general and certain members of the Palestinian Church who held an inadequate form of Judaistic Christianity and did not accept the Christology handed down from the Apostles. But this inadequate and semi-Jewish type of belief was not the true and original kind : it is totally foreign to the thought and attitude of Jewish writers such as Saint Paul, Saint Peter, Saint John, the authors of the first gospel and of Hebrews, and the authorities upon whom Saint Luke relied for the matter contained in the two first chapters of his gospel : it is not by faith in any such form of doctrine that Saint James, the first Bishop of Jerusalem,

¹ *Ap. Euseb. H.E.* iii. 32.

in his epistle equates Jesus with God ;¹ nor was it such a faith apparently in which the aged Symeon trusted, the second Bishop of Jerusalem, whose martyrdom under Trajan Hegesippus relates in the chapter just referred to ; since it was after Symeon's death that heresy began openly to uplift its head.² And Hegesippus ought to know what he was talking about, having been apparently a Hebrew, and flourished in the middle of the second century.

Hegesippus does indeed mention seven sects, some of whose members were responsible for procuring the murder of Symeon.³ But it is perfectly plain that these were Jewish, not Christian sects : their accusation against him was that he was a Christian, which they hardly therefore can have been themselves. Their names were enumerated and are mostly those of well-known Jewish divisions, and Hegesippus definitely calls them " Jewish opponents of the tribe of Judah and of Christ."⁴ Although then there may have been a few heresiarchs in the first century, there is no evidence that they had any serious following from within the Christian fold : Hegesippus denies that they had,⁵ and Eusebius (as quoted above) deems it doubtful after perusing Hegesippus' work if there were any heretics even in secret before the second century.

The claim of Ebionism then to represent the earliest tradition is not substantiated. Apparently there was no Ebionism, or at least it manifested no organization and made no public profession or aggressive movement, until the second century. It is depicted as a corruption of the true and primitive doctrine, and the truth of this description is borne out by its complete denial of the divinity of Christ. The motive of the Ebionites in rejecting the Virgin Birth is obvious enough : their attitude was based neither upon document nor on authoritative tradition, but on humanitarian refusal to believe that Christ was God. As with the Gnostics so with the Ebionites, the Virgin Birth was taken to imply the Incarnation. But the Incarnation was anathema, and consequently the Virgin Birth was

¹ Jas. i. 1, ii. 1, v. 14, 15 ; cf. iii. 9, iv. 10, v. 10, 11, etc.

² Loc. cit.

³ *Ap. Euseb. H.E.* iv. 22.

⁴ Loc. cit.

⁵ See above, " a virgin pure and undefiled."

sacrificed with it. In conclusion, the existence of Ebionitic heresy about the birth of Christ affords no argument against the belief of the Apostles and Evangelists in the miraculous character of that birth. Ebionism is to be regarded as a by-product of Judaism rather than as a Christian survival : it has no right to be heard against the unanimous teaching of the earliest Christian Fathers. And the latter teach the Virgin Birth as a cardinal article of the Christian faith.

VI

ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS : HEBRAIC

I N seeking to undermine the position held tenaciously in Christian dogma by the Gospel miracles, critics are nowadays not inclined to venture upon a direct ascription of fraud to the fathers of the Christian religion. Christianity would indeed be undermined at the foundation if its early professors were to be convicted of deliberate deceit. The religion which above all others insists upon an ideal standard of honesty and veracity being maintained in the dealings of men with men, would be sorely jeopardized if its system were discovered to have been supported in the days of its early struggles by more than hypocrisy and evasion, by thorough-paced chicanery.

Premeditated fiction consorts ill with suffering bitter persecution for the sake of blunt regard to facts, persecution too, which might have been easily avoided by such a little outward show of compromise either with the prejudices of Jewish tradition or with the cynically meaningless ceremonial of Roman orthodoxy. The attacks we are now engaged in meeting come from those whose aim it is to retain at least the Christian ethical system unimpaired. They do not therefore contend that men revered as saints, upon the pinnacle of holiness, were really cheats. Deceived they must have been, unless the Virgin Birth took place ; but not deceivers. It is therefore required to find evidence of the existence of some pit of misconception by means of which the good saints were trapped into assenting to a doctrine held for other reasons to be erroneous by up-to-date critics of the type with which we are dealing.

There are in principle three lines along which it is sought to show that the belief in the Virgin Birth might have arisen

otherwise than by the transmission of a true historical tradition. It will be simpler to treat the first two in conjunction, as indeed they are employed by certain critics. Of these two then, the first is the simplest, and though commonly combined with one of the others it is in principle distinct. Professor Harnack is in part an advocate of this theory, which in effect bases the doctrine simply upon misunderstanding of the phrase Son of God. He recognizes the primitive character of that title, as shown by its use in connexion with the Resurrection at the beginning of the epistle to the Romans,¹ and then attempts to trace a logical though not perhaps a chronological development in the meaning and application of the phrase. Men who held that Christ was declared Son of God by the Resurrection would not stop at that : they would quickly infer that he was the Son of God all the days of His sojourn here. "This is My beloved Son" was the utterance attributed to the heavenly Voice at the Transfiguration. "Thou art My beloved Son" is again the proclamation made at the Baptism when the Spirit as a dove descended on Christ ; and according to a "Western" reading, probably unauthentic, but certainly early, in Saint Luke's gospel, the Voice on that occasion added in the words of the psalm, "This day have I begotten Thee." The next step backward was to connect the Sonship and the Spirit alike, since they thus are found related at the Baptism, with the birth of the infant Jesus into the world. The birth of the Son is more appropriate than any other crisis of His life for an indisputable manifestation of His Sonship ; while the Spirit who so signally directed all His life, who lighted on Him at Jordan, drove Him into the wilderness, endowed Him with the exercise of power over evil spirits such that it might be described as the finger of God, and after His departure wrought so marvellously on the Church as to regain for His disciples new and vital communion with their ascended Lord, this Spirit of Jesus identified with Him so closely as to be at times only with difficulty distinguished in language from Christ Himself, must surely have been working as a divine agent to accomplish the entry of their Lord into the temporal sphere at all. Hence

¹ Romans i. 4.

from the two ideas, of Fatherhood displayed in the Incarnation, and the birth of the power of the Holy Spirit, arose the dogma of the Virgin Birth. This "new view" was "a logical conclusion from the belief that our Lord was *God's Son by the operation of the Holy Spirit.*"¹

Professor Lobstein reaches much the same conclusion by a slightly different road, comparing not different logical stages in the development of what he would call the myth of Jesus, but different levels of marvel found in parallel examples of the wonderful births of Jewish tradition. Starting from the idea of "promised" sons it is possible to trace a progress from the conception of Samson and Samuel, whose mothers had been barren, to that of Isaac, whose mother Sarah was in her old age, and of John the Baptist, the history of whose birth is set deliberately in relation to that of Jesus in the traditions accepted by the evangelist Saint Luke. John was the child of supernatural promise like Isaac; but the circumstances of his birth surpass those related of Isaac in the fact that he was "filled with the Holy Ghost even from his mother's womb."² Here we have a distinct approximation to the language used about the conception of Jesus. May it not be that the Christian consciousness, recognizing as it did the presence with John of the Divine Spirit, took one step further in our Lord's case, and on the basis of its more far-reaching conviction of Jesus' divine work and inspiration, made the inference that he was conceived not "with" but "by" the Holy Ghost?³

Combined with this theory both the authors quoted hold the second, that the origin of the belief is also to be traced to Isaiah vii. 14; though each puts upon it his own estimate of its importance. Professor Lobstein seems to think it was a more or less parallel development, entertained by exegetic theologians, who then reached out and welcomed the idea created by the religious imagination of the masses; but Professor Harnack goes much further, and expresses a deeply seated doubt whether apart from the verse in Isaiah "the idea of the Virgin Birth would have ever made

¹ Harnack, *Date of Acts*, p. 144.

² Luke i. 15.

³ *Virgin Birth of Christ*, pp. 68-72.

its appearance on Jewish soil." Accordingly the real foundation of the doctrine, on his view, was laid by Christians who, in searching the Old Testament Scriptures for confirmation of their faith, lighted on this passage, containing a suggestion of startling importance which on reflection was found to present far-reaching possibilities of combination with the notion in itself very far more commonplace that Jesus was the Son of God by the operation of the Holy Ghost. The verse thus discovered runs as follows in the Septuagint version: "Lo a¹ virgin shall be with-child and shall bring forth a son and shall call his name Immanuel," the reason given for the adoption of this name (meaning "God with us") being that before the time when a child could come to the birth the nation should have been delivered by God from the hands of its enemies. Taken apart from its context, in a way not uncommon among Jewish interpreters, the passage is indeed suitable enough to be applied to One whose mission was already recognized as being divinely inspired, One whose work had lain admittedly in bringing salvation to the people of God.

The first of these theories, that the Virgin Birth dogma arose as it were by the spontaneous combustion of Jewish or Christian elements in the original faith, does not lead very far. We have already seen that in practice it is not left to be taken on its own merits, but is used as a framework or support for the second theory. That is to say, its importance is not regarded as intrinsic but as cumulative. However, the weight even of this can be exaggerated. The weak point of the argument, and it is a very weak point indeed, is that the gradation of instances so carefully formed by each of the critics to whose theories we have referred, does not produce a logical ladder stepping up by regular intervals from source to conclusion, unless we reckon stages simply by purely verbal changes. This may easily be seen by looking once again at the instances quoted. In the first series, Professor Harnack takes for his *motif* the idea "that Jesus was the Son of God proceeding from the Spirit of God," and states that the Resurrection proved this for the

¹ The article in the Greek is probably a Hebraism, to be translated as in the text.

disciples.¹ But this is nowhere stated in the New Testament. The text he quotes from Romans i. 4 does not mean this. It is extremely doubtful if "the spirit of holiness" refers to the Holy Spirit at all, and not rather to the human spirit of the Holy and Righteous One²; at any rate, it is an odd way for the apostle to express himself if he does wish to convey that meaning, for nowhere else in the New Testament is the Holy Spirit called the Spirit of Holiness; and if it did denote the Holy Spirit, "according to the Spirit of Holiness" is a very different thing from "by the operation of" or "proceeding from," the Holy Ghost. We should require ὑπὸ or ἐκ, not κατὰ.

Furthermore, the Resurrection is not represented in the New Testament as being the outcome of the Holy Spirit's activity; for instance, in the early discourses upon the Resurrection recorded in Acts it is frequently related that God raised up his Servant Jesus, but the Holy Spirit is not mentioned in connexion with that event at all. Even the fervent spiritual life enjoyed by the disciples is not traced directly to the Resurrection, but to the outpouring on the day of Pentecost: and so far is it from being the case that the work of the Resurrection was in fact attributed to the Holy Ghost, that the possibility of Christ's receiving power to convey the promised gift of the Spirit was attributed to the Resurrection and Ascension having previously been accomplished. "This Jesus did God raise up . . . Being therefore by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost, He hath poured forth this which ye see and hear."³

It is indeed clear from 2 Corinthians viii. 9, Galatians iv. 4, etc., that Saint Paul did not think Jesus became the Son of God by the Resurrection. "Declared" to be so He certainly was: and Saint Paul, knowing Jesus was God's Son always, is pointing out that that fact, previously veiled from many who were acquainted with Him, was convincingly proved for them by the miracle of His Resurrection.

The same is true of the Transfiguration voice: it called

¹ *Date*, p. 143.

² Sanday and Headlam, *Romans*, p. 9.

³ Acts ii. 32 and 33.

attention to the existing fact that Jesus was the Son of God, and did not confer a new relationship upon Him. And it may be pointed out that this incident stands quite apart from the others from which Professor Harnack constructs his series, in that there is here certainly no reference to the Holy Spirit at all in any of the accounts. This destroys the value of the incident for his purpose, which is to show a connexion between the operation of the Spirit and the different manifestations of Christ's sonship.

With regard to the Baptism, though the Spirit and the Sonship are both prominent, there is no real connexion expressed between them. It would be different if the words on which Professor Harnack lays stress, "This day have I begotten Thee," formed an undoubted part of the true text. In that case there would be, not indeed an instance, but a shrewd hint, of the use of the doctrinal formula, *γεννηθεὶς ἐκ πνεύματος ἁγίου* in a sense not including the Virgin Birth; in fact, in the sense which Professor Harnack assumes it to have originally borne. But these words are only found connected with the Baptism in the "Western" texts of Luke, among canonical writings (not in Mark or Matthew at all) and in the Gospel of the Ebionites, which according to Epiphanius combined the "received" and the "Western" readings at this point.¹ The point at which the words actually are quoted, though Professor Harnack does not cite the passage, is in connexion with the Resurrection, in Acts xiii. 33, where St. Paul is recorded to have used them in his sermon to the Jews of Pisidian Antioch. So far, therefore, as regards the Baptism, the absence of the words in the true text constitutes not a progress in the series but a retrogression; and the form of the declaration, "Thou art My beloved Son," taken in connexion with its repetition at the Transfiguration where the Spirit is not mentioned at all, clearly dissociates its import from any dependence on the descent of the holy dove. It is a statement of general not of particular application, and was made at the Baptism, as at the Transfiguration, not because the Spirit then descended

¹ Epiph., *Haer* xxx. 13.

in bodily form, but simply as a witness to Christ's true position vouchsafed at a crisis of His earthly Life.

If it not, therefore, possible to regard even so much of Professor Harnack's list of instances as embodying a series. On passing, however, to the last instance, it is necessary to make a perfectly colossal jump. The gulf is well concealed on a verbal examination, but yawns cavernously when we think of the meaning of our words. From "conceived with the Holy Ghost," to "conceived by the Holy Ghost," one implying no more than the bestowal of a special divine blessing upon the issue of an ordinary human marriage, the other denying the human marriage altogether and substituting for it the divine quickening of a virgin's womb, surely this is not so much a step as a precipice, if we still desire to retain the plan of arranging instances in a series.

The same objections lie against the other form of the theory. In the first place there is no real series to be found. The only advance made, as far as the penultimate stage, is verbal, namely, that contained in the statement that John should be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb. But this is a description which might as well have been assigned to Samuel or to others of the prophets and heroes : in fact, of Samson it was commanded that he should at least "be a Nazirite unto God from the womb" (Judges xiii. 5), and the New Testament expression would surely have been employed of the prophets had the account of their lives been written in the age of the Caesars, instead of centuries before, when men's conceptions of the Holy Spirit were vague and undeveloped, if not non-existent.¹ And in the second place once more there is an unbridgeable chasm between the ideas (not the words, but the thought signified by the words) of John having the Holy Ghost bestowed upon him from the first moment of his existence, and of Christ's humanity being brought actually into existence through the operation of the Holy Ghost. In the former case the Holy Spirit is a gift, a passive benefaction : in the latter he is an active agent

¹ As a rule in the Old Testament the Spirit of Jehovah is said to come upon a person at a particular moment to convey a specific inspiration for a definite end, rather than to be a permanent spiritual endowment.

and a giver of physical life. The two notions stand poles apart.

If there is but little substance in the first theory of the origin of our dogma, can a better case be made out for the second? In the first place it needs to be recalled that there is no evidence for the text in Isaiah ever having been taken to imply a virgin birth, earlier than the first gospel. This is not decisive, but obviously it greatly lessens the probability that the idea arose from the text in question. It has indeed been argued recently that Jewish commentators may have taken the verse to predict a virgin birth for the Messiah, but that they changed their tone when the fulfilment of the prophecy was claimed for Jesus. This is very unlikely. They met Christian claims in another way, by saying that He whom the Christians called the Messiah was born of fornication. It was not likely that if they were really expecting a virgin-born Messiah they would cheerfully cast away a striking Messianic hope simply because a false Messiah, as they regarded Him, laid claim to one of the marks of the true. They did not give up other expectations, such as that the Christ would be born at Bethlehem, of the seed of David, merely because our Lord fulfilled them. It is not to be expected that they should have, any more than that Henry VII should have disclaimed descent from royal blood, because Perkin Warbeck laid a false claim to that title. The Jews simply disbelieved the story of the Virgin Birth of Christ, and considering it to be a fabrication tried to turn the edge of it by the broadest, readiest, and most effective retort within their power. But with regard to the Jewish Messianic expectations, there is nowhere any evidence extant of their including a belief that the Messiah would be virgin-born. Indeed, if Micah v. 3 is in fact a commentary upon the present passage in Isaiah, the opposite would seem to be implied.¹ Nor is this interpretation unnatural. The word "almah," "damsel" in Isaiah vii. 14, though actually only used elsewhere in the Old Testament of unmarried women, is admitted now on all hands to be capable of a wider meaning.

¹ "Therefore will he give them up, until the time that she which travaileth hath brought forth: then the residue of his brethren shall return unto the children of Israel."

And if it were not thus capable, there is nothing in the passage to exclude the notion that a woman was intended, at the time of uttering the prophecy a virgin, but shortly to be wedded: this gives to the prediction of Judah's deliverance a definite note of time which in some respects enhances its emphatic character of confident assurance. In this sense then we must interpret the rendering *παρθένος* which is found in the pre-Christian texts of the Septuagint (which also significantly changes "is with child" to "shall be with child"); for there is no sign anywhere of a contrary interpretation, and the alteration of the text to *νεάνις* in the Christian era is intelligible enough if the Jews had never taken *παρθένος* to imply a miraculous birth: they opposed the Christian dogma both by denying the Christian fact, as we have seen, and by cutting the ground from underneath the purely Christian theory.

But if it is still thought possible that the prophecy never taken in the sense of a virgin birth, was misunderstood in the fervent tumult of Christian thought, inebriated with the faith as if with new wine, let us consider what place the prophecy takes in the earliest extant Christian literature. The Virgin Birth is taught fully, explicitly and independently in two of the documents contained in the New Testament, Matthew and Luke. In the latter there is neither reference to nor hint of Isaiah vii. 14. Quotation is indeed made from an adjacent prophecy of Isaiah, with reference to the Davidic royalty and power of the promised Jesus;¹ but not with reference to the nature of His birth. The only comparison implied in the account of Christ's birth is with the details related of the birth of John the Baptist: there is scarcely any appeal to anything which may have been expected of the Messiah beyond His coming of David's house and from David's city: the narrative is tinged not with the sense of completion and fulfilment, of prophecy come true and shadowy types unveiled, but with the feeling of a fresh and glorious mystery of tidings of great joy full of wonder and amazement, incomparably greater than thought could have conceived, meet to be much pondered and long guarded in the heart, until the

¹ Luke i. 32, 33. Isaiah ix. 7 is the passage quoted.

human understanding can unfold sufficiently to contain their meaning.

In the former gospel, however, that according to Saint Matthew, there is a great deal of play made with the fulfilment, in the circumstances attending Christ's birth, of Old Testament predictions. Here then if anywhere we have some evidence afforded of the manner in which Old Testament predictions were utilised by the early Christians. Of what character are the quotations? Can they of themselves be thought to have suggested any of the details recorded as historical in the two first chapters of the gospel?

There are five prophecies quoted in those chapters; let us consider them in order. The first is the verse from Isaiah which is now under discussion. The second, in the mouth not of the evangelist but of the chief priests and scribes, is from Micah, predicting that the Messiah should come from Bethlehem: this certainly did not suggest the story of our Lord's birth in that locality, for as we know from Saint Luke,¹ Saint John,² and Jewish literature,³ it was a commonplace of Jewish belief that there the Messiah should be born. The third is from Hosea, "Out of Egypt have I called my Son," quoted in illustration of the fact that Christ sought refuge in Egypt from the persecution of Herod. This seems but a slight foundation upon which to build the whole legend, if it is a legend, of the adoration of the Magi and the Flight into Egypt. But when we turn to the original context it appears at once an incredible proposition that the passage should have put into the head of anybody, however deeply inebriated with the new wine of Christianity, the idea that Christ must be represented as coming up out of Egypt. The passage simply describes the long-suffering mercies of God and the evil requital made by the rebellious Hebrew nation. "When Israel was a child, then I called My Son out of Egypt. As they called them, so they went from them; they sacrificed unto the Baalim and burned incense to graven images." In connexion with the description of Israel as God's Son, it will be recalled that Hosea was

¹ Luke ii. 11.

² John vii. 42.

³ References, Allen, *Matthew*, p. 13; Edersheim, *Life and Times*, i. p. 206.

the first of the prophets to describe the relations between the nation and its God in terms of family affection : there is not the suspicion of a Messianic reference in the passage before us. The fourth is from Jeremiah, quoted in illustration of the grief at Bethlehem and the neighbourhood over the murder of the Holy Innocents. In its original context the passage refers not to murders at all but to the captivity in Babylon of the inhabitants of Judah ; and it proceeds immediately to counsel comfort on the ground that " they shall come again from the land of the enemy." He would be a most intoxicated Christian who from such material could deduce that all the children of the Bethlehem district up to two years old should be put to death in connexion with the advent of the Messiah. The fifth quotation is from sources as yet untraced, and consists simply of the words " He shall be called a Nazarean " : it is inserted to illustrate the fact of Christ's domicile at Nazareth, but what passage of the Old Testament the words are intended to represent, nobody has yet succeeded in showing. Here again most emphatically the fact existed before the prophecy was applied : we know from Saint Luke that Christ's parents had their home at Nazareth before the Annunciation. We can only conclude that Matthew's use of Isaiah vii. 14 is on a level with the rest of his quotation of the Old Testament, whether he discovered his passages for himself for the purposes of his gospel or took them over from some earlier compilation or from Christian oral exegesis. So far from any of the passages lying under the suspicion of having suggested stories of events which never actually took place, the primary historical reference of most of these quotations is so remote from the facts of the Gospel which they are adduced to illustrate as to make their verbal citation seem forced and to many minds inept.

In view of the apparently non-miraculous sense in which Isaiah vii. 14 was interpreted by the Jews, it would seem that its employment by Matthew is but another instance of the forced application of the Old Testament, in isolated fragments torn from their proper context, to the facts of Christ's life. Taken by itself the quotation seems totally incapable of having given rise to the full and com-

plete story of the Virgin Birth. But we may still ask whether it is not just within the bounds of possibility that taken in conjunction with the belief in Jesus being the Son of God (discussed above) it might have had the effect of starting such a doctrine. Jesus was the Son of God in a special and unique sense : He rejoiced to call God His Father : He in an unparalleled degree exhibited the influence and impress of the Holy Spirit. Can it be that men erroneously concluded from the combination of these facts with the misquotation of Isaiah that the Holy Spirit took the place in His conception of a human father ?

It is indeed as difficult to see why Isaiah should have been so suddenly misunderstood as it is to comprehend why confusion should have arisen between the two ideas of the Spirit's guidance accompanying all a man's activities from infancy upwards, and of his manifesting a creative activity such as never had occurred to Jewish minds before the birth of Christ. If the Isaiah theory were correct, we should be involved in a strange intellectual leap from an idea involving nothing beyond the commonplace to one involving a stupendous miracle ; and if the Son of God theory were correct, in a leap from a fact of spiritual experience to one of physical science. And if it is thought that to combine the theories doubles the probability of their attaining to the level of proof, at the same time it must be confessed that their logical difficulty, and the psychological unlikelihood of two such intellectual leaps being made, are doubled also.

But there is a further objection. The association of the two theories throws into violent juxtaposition the two propositions that Christ was the Son of God and that He had no earthly father. He was to be the son of a virgin according to the special interpretation of Isaiah, and He was the Son of God, by common consent. The united theories emphasize what is in a sense true, that in the Incarnation the lack of a human father was supplied by the Fatherhood of God. But this is exactly such an idea as the doctrine of the Virgin Birth, with its ascription of the divine agency at work in the Incarnation not to God the Father but to the Holy Ghost, would not have been very likely to have been invented to convey. For in the first

place the Spirit was not identified, in early Christian thought, with God the Father ; if there ever was any confusion of thought about the nature of His personality, as indeed there does seem sometimes in the New Testament to be a confusion of language, it was not with the Father but with the Son that His personality tended to be blurred. That He was known as the Spirit of Jesus is a commonplace of New Testament exegesis. But if the Spirit was the Spirit of Jesus, how could the fact of Jesus being called the Son of God give rise to the doctrine that He was conceived by the Spirit? Jesus cannot be father to Jesus. Secondly, the idea of the Spirit filling the place of a human father, though it does not seem so incongruous to modern ears, accustomed as they are to the age-long use of masculine terms in reference to His personality, would have had on Jewish minds a very different effect ; for in Hebrew the word denoting " Spirit " is of the feminine gender, and in the myth-making gospel of the Hebrews the Holy Ghost is consequently called Christ's mother. And thirdly, when the first Person of the Trinity was habitually addressed in prayer as " our Father " upon the authority of Jesus, and Jesus was commonly described as His Son, it would be by a most strange twist of legend-mongering that a myth should spring up ascribing the conception of the Son to any one except the Father. The fact that Christ is nevertheless invariably said to have been conceived by the Holy Ghost is altogether contradictory to the theory that the doctrine of the Virgin Birth arose in the way Professor Harnack and others would have us believe.

VII

ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS : MYTHOLOGICAL

THERE yet remains a third theory of the way in which the doctrine of the Virgin Birth might have arisen, supposing it to be a legend. It has been suggested that the real source of the idea is to be found in pagan mythology, and some pains have been taken to rake over the whole heap of stories, pleasant and unpleasant, which have been furnished by the study of comparative religion and the baser sort of secular history, to secure a parallel. The result has been to bring to light a large number of stories connected with the mystery of human conception and birth : considering the awe and interest shown by savages all the world over at the processes of physical nature, human and non-human, one could hardly have dreamed that the search would be attended by any other result. But to discover quantities of tales is not a very valuable contribution to scientific knowledge, unless the tales in question bear upon the subject of the inquiry : it must now be considered whether they do so or not.

The story of the Buddha can be ruled out at once. The earlier versions of the tale do not suggest that Gautama was virginally conceived ; and the later accounts which do contain some such doctrine, though in several respects different from the Christian one, cannot be traced back to such an early date as that of the gospels. They are in fact strongly suspected of being themselves the outcome of contact with Christianity, as that religion (in a somewhat heretical form) existed for centuries side by side with Buddhism throughout Asia.¹ Another line of argument

¹ See, for instance, the *Travels of Marco Polo*, passim.

is also fruitless, namely that by which it has been sought to refer the doctrine to the supposed fusion of certain North Arabian and Babylonian elements in Jewish folklore at the period which saw the belief in the Virgin Birth spring up. As for the existence of floating myths of pagan origin in Palestine at that time, it may be true that Jewish Apocalyptic literature had been impregnated in some degree with ideas originally culled from Babylonian and Persian mythology, which were employed to deck Hebrew doctrine with illustrative imagery¹; but these heathen sources certainly exercised no direct influence of their own on Christianity, and there is no real evidence even that in such mythologies there was contained the notion of a virginal conception, still less that any such idea was absorbed from them into Judaism. We have seen already that Judaism shows no sign of having ever held a belief in the virgin birth of its expected Messiah. In fact this theory of the origin of the Christian dogma advances nothing more than a violent conjecture based not on evidence but on further violent conjectures: it neither does nor could command any support from serious authorities.²

More, however, needs to be said about the other branches into which the Myth Theory flows. The eyes of the theorist now turn westward, and find in Greek mythology something upon which to fix their attention. The tale of Perseus is justly taken as typical of a whole cycle of legends, and it is sought to draw a close analogy between them and the Virgin Birth narratives.³ Now in that legend Danae is related to have been immured in a tower of brass and to have conceived Perseus by Zeus visiting her in the form of a shower of gold. Many other tales exist in folklore, attributing conception to something more or less different from the ordinary intercourse of man and woman. Sometimes they take a form similar to that of the classical Perseus legend just described: a woman may be said to have been embraced by a rainbow, or "impregnated by the vivifying influence of the heavens," where of course it is the all-

¹ Though not, as we shall see, from Greek mythology.

² For details see Thorburn, *Doctrine of the Virgin Birth*, pp. 159 seqq.

³ For a large collection of such legends see Hartland, *Legend of Perseus*.

pervading material atmosphere which the myth intends to represent as exerting that influence upon her. Or sometimes her condition is induced by more obviously magical means, such as the eating of food which may or may not have been in contact with a male person, whom the legend then seems to regard as if he had acted in the natural capacity of a husband. Usually such notions are applied directly; but later on by a more frankly mythical and magical refinement the particular event is represented as occurring to the woman in a dream.

Now in most of the legends of this class there is no idea of divine paternity at all, and the explanation of the stories is quite clear: they belong to quite primitive times when the real cause of a woman's pregnancy was only obscurely comprehended, and was thought capable of substitution by imitative processes which are the regular stock-in-trade of magical practice. We find laid down as inducing pregnancy such causes as the following: the mere lust of a man's eye, the reception, by way of the mouth, of magic food and drink, the touch of a magic wand upon the breasts, magic baths, and finally contact with mists, wind and the rays of the sun. The underlying ideas are frequently of high poetic beauty, but still magical, that is to say material; the sphere in which they move is purely that of the ordinary physical processes of the natural world. No doubt physical processes are misunderstood in the legends; they try to apply the idea of physical causation to circumstances and conditions in which, as science has now taught us, it is not really applicable. But when all is said we are simply faced with misrepresentation of scientific possibilities, and that no more extraordinary than in the case of a witch who sticks pins into the image of her enemy, or consigns the clippings of his toe-nails to the flames, with the object of working him ill. Here is no ascent into the regions of spiritual truth, but only a descent into the sometimes miry retreats of material unreason. Zeus does not come to Danae as a shower of gold because the notion of physical union is too gross for the mythologist's audience, but because a being in human shape could not pass the sentries or unlock the door of the castle where she lay imprisoned. The legend

merely proves that without physical access in a material form of some kind or other it was impossible to conceive of a woman becoming pregnant.

The doctrine of the Virgin Birth embodies an entirely different principle.¹ In the first place it does not teach that the conception of Christ was due to any physical antecedent at all, magical or otherwise. Mary was a virgin, in the strict sense: she knew not a man; the quickening force that came upon her was of the Holy Spirit alone, with no visible appearance or theophany, and no material accompaniment or symbol: as we have just seen in another connexion, the fact of "Spirit" being in Hebrew a word of feminine gender excludes any notion of divine paternity in a physical sense. There was no sacrament, as it were, vouchsafed her, no outward and visible sign of the divine presence or of the grace with which she was highly favoured, nothing so much as even to suggest material contact or magical operation; her conception was entirely due to spiritual causes. The consequence indeed was physical, namely her pregnancy; the antecedent fact was wholly in the other sphere, namely a new creative activity of the divine Spirit welling up through the crust that divides the spiritual from the material world. For whereas in the legends the mothers under discussion were not really virgins, and the question of virginity strictly does not arise, in Christian doctrine Mary is Virgin both before and after the birth of her Son, as Ignatius (*circa* A.D. 110) and Irenaeus notoriously testify. Taking then the legends at their best, we find between them and the Christian story a decisive cleavage of principle. Even if some of the details of the Virgin Birth account might conceivably have been borrowed from the trappings of pagan mythology (which cannot be proved) the core and meaning of the dogma could not have been borrowed, for they never existed outside Christianity. The argument from the myths, and this answer to it, is of course not new: it is at least as old as Justin Martyr, in the first half of the second century. That Father formulates his answer as

¹ The contrast will be realized still more strongly when the character and meaning of the Virgin Birth itself have been more fully discussed in Chapter VIII.

follows : “ Lest any should fail to understand the prophecy demonstrated (Isa. vii. 14), and should bring against us the same accusation that we have brought against the poets, who speak of Zeus having gone in unto women for sexual gratification, we will try to make these matters clear. The text “ Behold the Virgin shall be with child ” indicates that the virgin conceived without intercourse (ὄν συνουσιασθεῖσαν συλλαβεῖν) . . . (The Spirit) came upon the virgin and overshadowed her, and rendered her pregnant (ἐγκύμονα κατέστησε) not through intercourse but through power (or, miracle).”¹

We have stated above that we were for the moment taking the legends at their best. But the legends were not always at their best : in fact the later their date the further are they removed from their best. As time passed by, civilization increased and science became a subject of keen intellectual study among the Greeks, a fact which naturally enough is reflected in their legends. Attempts began to be made either to explain or to explain away such mythological elements as required this treatment ; and the basis of such explanation was the assumption that so far as possible the legends must be brought into line with the now well-known physical facts of life. The degradation which the legends underwent in this process is notorious ; the physical problems involved in them, which were originally implied rather than stated, and were always kept in the background, were now brought forward into a vulgar prominence as if the story existed for them instead of they for the story. In the Roman period the name of the goddess of Love had become the ordinary prosaic synonym for bestial lust. The legend of the birth of Perseus suffered like the rest. The more recondite literary explanation was that by the shower of gold is poetically figured the bribery of the guards, and that the real father of Perseus was not Zeus but a human seducer, the uncle of Danae. This theory seems from his fairly broad hint to have gained the favour of the poet Horace, who looks at life with the tolerant cynicism of a cultivated man of the world.² The more popular and superstitious theory wallows through filth to retain

¹ Justin, *Apology*, I, xx.

² Hor. *Odes*, III, 16.

the part of Zeus in the business, frankly dubs him adulterer, and insists upon the grossest interpretation of the shower of gold. Juno, in Statius' *Thebaid*, upbraiding Jupiter on account of the Danae incident amongst others, blandly remarks, "Mentitis ignosco toris";¹ and the incident itself she mentions in terms with an unmistakably physical reference, "(licet) saeptis . . . turribus aureus intres": to which Ovid adds the culminating indecency when he writes, "Perseus, Jove natus et illa Quam clausam implevit fecundo Juppiter auro."² If the earlier form of the legends, long obsolete in the time of the gospels, provided no matter really capable of suggesting an idea so novel as that of a Virgin Birth, certainly in the form in which they were current in the first century after Christ, they cannot have contributed the basis of the dogma. From adultery, even on the part of the supreme deity, it is a far cry to virginity.

All the arguments which could be cited in opposition to the theory that the Virgin Birth was suggested by the alleged occurrence of similar incidents in myths, apply in redoubled force to the variant version of that theory with which we have now finally to deal. It is asserted that the Virgin Birth story of Christ was copied from the vulgar stories current, especially in the Eastern portion of the Roman Empire, about the origin of certain world-known men of history such as Alexander the Great, Plato, and above all Augustus. Now these stories must be read in their proper historical setting. They are part and parcel of a tendency to deify great men, which began to show active movement before the particular details of their divine births were added to their histories. Lysander, the conqueror of Athens (404 B.C.), was the first European to be worshipped with divine honours during his own lifetime; and the practice was due simply to the superstitious sentiment of the inhabitants of Asia Minor who, leaders as they were in every form of misbelief, strove thus to satisfy their instinct for discovering the divine in nature. They found it in what seemed to them the superhuman ability of greater men than themselves. Accordingly Alexander from political motives worked upon their cred-

¹ *Theb.* I, 256, 255.

² Ovid, *Metam.* IV, 697-8.

ulity by spreading the tale not only that he was the son of Zeus, as the desert oracle of Ammon had proclaimed him, but that he had been begotten by a divine serpent having intercourse with his mother Olympias instead of by Philip. In other words he borrowed his facts from mythology, and that the grosser kind. It was similarly in the Eastern part of the Empire that Augustus was first worshipped ; and although the habit spread even to Italy, it was found possible there to reduce it within some bounds by associating Augustus as an object of worship closely with the city of Rome, which shows that the genius or holy spirit of the Emperor was only worshipped as embodying in a paramount degree the greatness of the imperial power concentrated in his hands. The idea is in a way very similar to that of national angels or " princes " said in Daniel to preside over various countries such as Greece and the kingdom of Persia.¹ To strengthen and increase the idea that in the person of the Emperor was embodied the providence which through the ages had produced all the religious sanctity, practical greatness, and sentimental glamour of Rome, various tales came into circulation regarding the circumstances of his birth : they form a highly unedifying collection and may be read at large in the Life by Suetonius. They are drawn from every source : portents of the old Italian type, Greek superstition, magical legend, astrological quackery all contribute their quota. The particular story of Augustus' conception is based on similar material to that of Alexander's. His mother was sleeping in the temple of Apollo when the god visited her in the form of a serpent : the story is complete down to the grossest detail, and patently arose in the obscene atmosphere of Hellenistic culture, where temple fornication was a common feature of divine worship.²

The Plato myth, in like manner, was invented to glorify the godlike wisdom of the great thinker. It, too, describes anything but a virgin birth : Plato's existence is referred to the physical union of his mother with the god Apollo.³

¹ Daniel x. 13, 20.

² Hence the constant warnings against fornication in the New Testament.

³ See note at end of chapter.

These legends were never for a moment regarded by the man of the world with anything but ridicule, and may confidently be rejected as a source for the Christian doctrine. They are based solely on physical notions, and that in an obscene degree ; their general tone is fantastic and irrational, unlike the reasoned sobriety of the gospel ; and Christianity, which, as we shall see, drew none of its early inspiration from pagan sources, was thoroughly on its guard against the pollution of such contaminated springs.

There is only one way in which the dogma could even be thought to have originated under mythological influence, since deliberate fraud is out of the question. Popular and pious fancy (shared by the intelligent leaders of the Church), seeming to appreciate in the legends something of religious value, might possibly be conceived of as having accused the devil of abusing an idea which from its religious value could only be regarded as true of Christ, by transferring it to the sphere of heathen myth : whereupon it would be the duty of a Christian to re-transfer it to its proper environment. This involves the supposition that the first Christians without exception were superstitious men, and that hearing of the heroes whose fathers were alleged to be gods they thought those stories, though not true of the heroes, must from their intrinsic worth be true of somebody. But this is just the opposite of their real attitude to paganism. The idols of the heathen gods were nothing,¹ and the forces operating through them were devils,² in the opinion of Saint Paul. Any doctrine connected with them would not have been considered true in itself, but as a lying blasphemy against reason and morals : because the Gentiles exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped the creature, God gave them up unto uncleanness in the lusts of their hearts : they became vain in their reasonings, and their senseless heart was darkened, and they learnt to change the natural use into that which was against nature.³ Nothing they had to teach was in the least acceptable to Christianity.

Nor can it be thought that a Christian prejudice in favour

¹ 1 Cor. viii. 4, 5.

² 1 Cor. x. 20, 21.

³ Rom. i. 25, 24, 21, 26.

of virginity might have assisted in the consummation¹ of a process of transference. The notorious sentiment for virginity arose later than the spread of the Virgin Birth story. Saint Paul's advice on the subject of marriage was dictated by practical not by theoretical considerations;² and Saint Peter, the Lord's "brethren," and other apostles are stated by Saint Paul himself to have been married men.³ So the theory must be lightened at once of that support.

Nor were the first Christians superstitious men. They were extraordinarily tenacious of their own traditions, and extraordinarily exclusive in maintaining them. "Stand fast and hold the traditions which ye were taught";⁴ indeed Saint Paul constantly refers to the facts delivered to himself and by him handed on to his converts:⁵ the appeal is continually made to a deposit of faith, by which judgment should be made of the truth, which shows that nothing could have been received that had not behind it adequate historical authority. "Though we or an angel from heaven should preach unto you a gospel other than as we preached unto you, let him be anathema."⁶ "Take heed lest there shall be any one that maketh spoil of you through his philosophy and vain deceit after the tradition of men."⁷ "Give not heed to myths and endless genealogies."⁸ "Test everything, hold what is good."⁹ Saint Paul was no more credulous than we had reason to suppose Saint Luke was, in an earlier chapter; and everything we know of the first Christians would tend to make us think them men of remarkable sobriety, caution, independence, and intellectual sanity.

And even apart from the insistence on tradition and suspicion of paganism, the absolute moral divergence still needs to be explained which differentiates the legends from the Christian dogma. What the two have in common is

¹ 1 Cor. vii. 25-28.

² 1 Cor. ix. 5.

³ 2 Thess. ii. 15.

⁴ See especially 1 Cor. xi. 23, xv. 3, dealing with the Eucharist and the Resurrection.

⁵ Gal. i. 8 (εὐαγγελισθῆται ὑμῖν παρ' ὃ εὐηγγελισάμεθα, cf. μεταστρέψαι τὸ εὐαγγέλιον in the previous verse).

⁶ Col. ii. 8.

⁷ 1 Tim. i. 4.

⁸ 1 Thess. v. 21.

not a positive thing, like true virginity of the mother, but a negative thing, the absence of wedlock. What needs to be proved is that the idea of a birth without a father of the human species could have been transferred without any regard to its context from paganism to Christianity, when its environment in pagan myth was horribly immoral and its implications in Christian doctrine were transcendently and obstinately spiritual. The fatherhood of God in the Incarnation is a very different thing from the pater-nity of Zeus or of Apollo and of their sacred snakes, which is proved by the fact that the latter doctrine could not be preached without recourse to statements of physical processes, whereas the former undoubtedly was taught in the first place even independently of the Virgin Birth,¹ and that truth (assuming for the moment that it was such) was only revealed in the later stages of the catechetical instruction of converts, if indeed it was not preserved esoterically during the whole of the first thirty years of Christianity. So far from teaching divine procreation, Saint Luke teaches that the fatherhood of God in the Incarnation was only indirect. In reply to Mary's reasonable objection that she knew not a man, Gabriel answered that God the Father of Jesus would act only through the Holy Spirit to produce a miracle upon her, and that only therefore "the holy being (or thing) which is begotten" should be properly named God's Son.²

The only way in which it might be sought to bridge the gulf would be by arguing that in the purer atmosphere of Christianity the pagan idea would be automatically purified on transference: that the Christian of the first century would have discarded the feature of procreation by gods (whom he regarded with some justification as devils), and substituted for it the divinely mediated entry of God's Son without any form of procreation into the created world. But let us consider for a moment what was that pagan idea which is supposed to have been transferred and to have been capable of purification in the process. Surely it could only have been the whole notion that a child born in the world could be the Son of the deity.

¹ See Acts xiii. 33, ii. 33, and compare above Chap. V.

² Luke i. 34, 35.

That is the root idea for which the legends stand : they testify to the conviction that a man of superhuman character and capacity must be the embodiment in special degree of divine powers. Now if the Christian idea of the divine Sonship had been borrowed from the legends, it could reasonably have been described as a refinement upon its original : it might have been regarded as a fresh version of the old idea, purified by the substitution of a single new feature instead of the gross detail of divine procreation.

But Christ's Sonship in itself bears no relation to the doctrines of the myths, and was certainly not derived from them. The inclusion of a doctrine of miraculous birth was not necessary to the Christian belief in Christ's being the divine Son of God : that belief, as we have seen, was held independently even of the Virgin Birth, and was not connected in any way whatever with the legends. Therefore the theory of a supposed purification, by transference, of the whole pagan conception of divine sonship falls to the ground, and all that is left is the contrast of one alleged fact in Christian doctrine with the utterly different fact that is alleged in the corresponding place in the myths. For since the Christian doctrine of the fatherhood of God is intrinsically independent of the legends in any case, whether the Virgin Birth story is so or not, the only feature of the pagan story remaining to be transferred is precisely that in which the Christian and the pagan conceptions of divine fatherhood are fundamentally opposed to one another. In other words we are not really being asked to admit the possible modification and purification of a legendary story, but to assent to the mutual substitution, as between the pagan and the Christian accounts, of absolutely opposite ideas. But the substitution of antagonistic ideas is not the same thing as the transference of a single idea from one context to another : it is the negation of it. We find, not evidence that Christianity may have been influenced by the legends, but proof that it was not so influenced. It is beside the point to repeat that in both cases we have a story involving birth of a human mother without the interposition of a human male agent : the divinity of the agent in the myths is an accidental, though unavoidable, coincidence. The essence of the matter is

that in one case we read of male interposition, and in the other male interposition is excluded. And the primitive Christian who believed that Jesus was the Son of God would assuredly think it no gain that his Lord should be placed beside the sons of the gods, however much they might be disinfected first.

The absolute divergence in moral tone between the legends and the Christian story is therefore not to be accounted for by automatic purification of the former in a higher religious atmosphere. Rather the difference of moral context must be considered as a complete and fundamental bar to the possibility of any infiltration having permeated into Christianity from heathen sources. And the direct connexion of the myths with devil-worship (in the view of the early Christian) and with religious prostitution such as he was taught to abhor in the Old Testament, must infallibly have worked upon him to the utter condemnation of such notions as the myths might contain or even appear, however remotely, to suggest and support, unless he was already committed to them by his own evangelic tradition.

Thoroughly consonant with the difference in essential meaning and moral environment between the Christian and the pagan stories is the contrast in their respective attitude towards the miraculous. The rationalizing tendency apparent in pagans of the school with which Horace is identified was by no means widespread; those who did not treat the legends of the heathen gods with cynically contemptuous agnosticism went to the other extreme and regarded them with fatuous credulity. The uneducated classes and many from among the educated and socially distinguished also, gave themselves up more or less in their craving for the satisfaction of their religious emotions to the enervating influence of oriental cults; and in the spiritual and intellectual condition produced in the non-Jewish world by those cults in the first century after Christ it was easy to believe whatever portents a religious myth might carry with it. Consequently, between the credulously simple, who would believe almost everything, and the cynically indifferent, who believed nothing but for the sake of the accursed multitude would contemptuously assent to anything, superstition flourished like a rank weed and

the trade of the miracle-monger was prosperous.¹ The legends were by no means pruned of their marvels ; rather those marvels were enormously enhanced through being accepted and written down by men of reasonable pretence to knowledge and education. There can be no doubt that, for instance, in the Perseus myth, the grim legend of the Gorgon's head and the marvellous preservation of the infant hero and his mother from the sea, were as thoroughly accepted as the wildest tales that found credence in the Middle Ages. Now if the story of the Virgin Birth had arisen from imitation, conscious or unconscious, of the pagan legends it is almost past belief that it should not have retained in great part the superstitious tendency of those myths. The unofficial stories which sprang up later, about the second century, in the uncanonical writings give full play to the desire for miraculous embellishment. Birds stood still in full flight, they tell us, and all nature was momentarily paralysed at the birth of Jesus ; and the infant Messiah worked such wonders as turning boys into kids and causing clay birds to fly. But these apocryphal gospels were just the documents which the Church refused to recognize : the early and canonical accounts are entirely free from any influence of the sort. Given once the fact of a child being formed in the womb by a fresh creative power of the divine Spirit, all the rest flows naturally on, and no further miracle is recorded whatever in the physical environment of the child. Wonderful signs are indeed shown, but none of them necessitates the interruption of the normal course of nature ; and such, even of them, as are recorded, breaking the general reserve of the gospel narratives, are few. Astrologers from the East by grace were led from the contemplation of a star to visit Jerusalem ; and upon their arrival were rejoiced to see the same star once more and were led by it to the neighbouring village of Bethlehem. Two or three times Saint Joseph received divine communications in a dream ; spiritual beings appeared to shepherds in a field and in the soberest and sanest strain announced to them the birth of the promised Christ. Twelve years later in the Temple the boy

¹ See Dill, *Roman Society from Nero to Marcus Aurelius*, pp. 481, 482, etc.

Jesus displayed the advanced intelligence of an unusually brilliant child. And that is the whole sum of the gospel portents relating to the birth and infancy of our Lord: a total far too modest to suggest the influence of pagan legends. The real influence of the myths was, as we have hinted above, exercised later upon the existing Christian story, but cannot possibly have been responsible for its genesis.

There is another reason for discounting, upon general grounds, the theory of the mythical origination of the Christian dogma. Reasonable critics are convinced that the story spread from Jewish circles outwards and not in the opposite direction from the centre of Graeco-Roman or Graeco-Oriental life. Its true home is in Palestine, and in fact it is entirely permeated with Jewish sentiment: the authors of its acceptance were without doubt Hebrew Christians.¹ But, upon such, pagan legend is most unlikely to have exercised any influence. That section of the Jewish nation which was in any degree given to indulgence in myth had its domicile and headquarters at Alexandria. But even the Alexandrian Jews did not borrow their material so much as their ideas and methods from the Greeks: the matter upon which they allegorized, by importing into it their preconceived philosophy, was the Old Testament. On the other hand, the Jews of Palestine were strongly opposed to any sort of compromise with the heathenism of which they saw around them only the worse effects exhibited, and from which they had so bitterly suffered during their intense struggles to maintain the exclusive purity of their morals and theology. The party in Palestine which had once affected Greek fashions and habits had long before the formation of the Christian Church been reduced to annihilation. Between the Jew of Palestine and his Gentile neighbour there raged all the fire of hatred that could be kindled in the heart of a sensitive and passionate nation by its memory of harrowing religious persecution and interference, by its resentment at foreign intrusion and its own political subservience to an empire which on moral and religious grounds it heartily despised, by its consciousness of the physical repulsion

¹ Cf. Box, *Virgin Birth of Jesus*, passim, for Hebrew characteristics in the two gospel accounts.

felt by the Aryan western for the Semitic Jew, by its devoted adherence to exclusive and old-fashioned social taboos which appeared to other peoples merely a barbarous survival, and by its bigoted sense that only within the Jewish fold was there either hope or possibility of obtaining salvation. The contemptuous loathing that resulted from the combination of these various forces produced an overwhelming weight of prejudice against anything pagan, which even Christianity failed for a long time altogether to dispel: a prejudice which was more than sufficient, even if its extreme bitterness were dissipated by the Christian sentiment of universal charity, to leave the Church well on its guard against contamination of its doctrines from Hellenistic sources. "The ideas taken over as their inheritance by Christians from the Jews," writes Professor Harnack, "encircled the earliest Christendom as with a wall of fire, and preserved it from a too early contact with the world."¹ To believe that Hellenistic myth suggested any article of Christian doctrine is as hard as to conceive of a troop of Cromwell's Ironsides on its knees praying before an image of our Lady, or an Independent preacher inculcating to it the cultus of the fairies.

It remains in conclusion to point out the negative character of all these attacks upon the historical truth of the Virgin Birth. It is to be hoped that in the preceding paragraphs good reason has been shown for thinking it impossible for the doctrine to have sprung into existence from any of the causes suggested. The grounds alleged are altogether insufficient and beside the point. But even if this were not so, and the possibility did lie open that one or other of them was in a position to exert such an influence on Christian dogma, still the case of our opponents would not be proved. No one can prove a doctrine to be actually false by merely indicating a number of ways in which, once granted that it were false, it might be conceived to have arisen. The Virgin Birth in the circumstances supposed would have been shown to have been merely *post rem*, but not necessarily therefore *propter rem*: the causal connexion would still require to be certified. There is a given fact to be explained, namely the spread of the

¹ *Hist. of Dogma*, E.T. I, p. 101 and note.

dogma of the Virgin Birth. Those who attack the dogma have advanced several hypotheses which if correct would indicate that the belief arose as a conclusion from false premisses. But they have not proved that any such hypothesis is required: there is still the possibility that the doctrine is true, and arose by the transmission of historical fact. If, for instance, all that were needed to disprove it were the unearthing of a dim heathen parallel, the whole of Christianity would be disproved, for practically everything in Christianity can in some shadowy verbal form be paralleled. Sin and salvation are expressions by no means confined to the Christian religion or even to the Jewish: there are heathen analogies for Baptism,¹ the Eucharist, and Absolution; Resurrection is a doctrine well known to mythology. Perhaps the *reductio ad absurdum* of such argument is to be found in the attitude assumed by the author of a book² from the publisher's advertisement of which the following extract is drawn: "This book is an able attempt to show that the origin of Christianity can be accounted for without the assumption of an historical Jesus. By a comparison of the myths current in the early Christian period with the Pauline Epistles and the gospels the author reaches the conclusion that Jesus was not an historical figure but the 'suffering God'³ of a Jewish sect, to whom the metaphysical speculation of St. Paul gave universal significance."

Perhaps an allegory might help to make the situation clear. A valuable jewel is discovered by the police for sale in a dealer's shop, and immediately a throng of detectives leaps upon the trail; one says the dealer may be a receiver of stolen property, and another suspects that the jewel is only a clever imitation made of paste. On the other hand, the dealer asserts that the jewel is genuine and was left in his keeping by a gentleman who did not wish his name to be disclosed to the public. The dogma of the

¹ Even for being "washed in blood."

² *The Christ Myth*, by Arthur Drews, Ph.D., professor of philosophy at Karlsruhe.

³ The inverted commas are inserted by the present writer. The notion of a "Suffering God" who undergoes death is one well-known to students of comparative religion and mythology.

Virgin Birth is situated roughly in the same position as the jewel. The detectives cannot prove that the stone is really paste ; they only hold that this hypothesis is a possible one. Nor can they prove that any burglary has taken place or that the dealer is confederate with a band of thieves ; the " critics " only testify to their unproved conviction that the laws of nature have been broken. The Church's own explanation still remains that the doctrine in question neither was spontaneously generated from Jewish material nor was plagiarised from pagan mythology, but is the expression of genuine historical fact. And it is respectfully submitted that her explanation is by far the best.

NOTE ON THE PLATO MYTH.

This myth deserves more attention than it has received, and that must be our excuse for giving its history here somewhat fully. It is apparently first mentioned in extant literature by Plutarch (*floruit* second half of the first century A.D.) in *Quaest. Conviv.* viii. 1. He speaks of " those who refer Plato's begetting to Apollo " as if they were well enough known to his readers. He then mentions " the alleged vision to Plato's father Ariston in his sleep, and voice forbidding him intercourse with his wife for ten months." Farther on he discusses and rejects the notion that the exceptional qualities of super-normal men such as Plato are infused into them by the gods by means of the particular method of physical paternity. From this it is perfectly certain that the story to which he is referring ascribed the conception of Plato by his mother Perictione to the physical seed of Apollo.

The story is next related by Apuleius (*de dogm. Plat.* i. 1). Apuleius was born about A.D. 125. He says that " a sort of appearance of Apollo had intercourse with Perictione," according to the view held by some persons. This looks like a rough paraphrase of the same story which Plutarch tells, the vision to Ariston in his sleep being confused with the adulterous union of the god with Perictione. The garbling is possibly Apuleius' own work, as the next writer reverts to the Plutarchian type.

That writer is Diogenes Laertius (*floruit* c. A.D. 230 or later). He is known to have used Plutarch, but at this point is following independent sources. The story comes at the beginning of his life of Plato, *de vit. phil.* iii. 2, and is introduced as follows. After relating Plato's ancestry on both sides, he proceeds, " But Speusippus in the book entitled ' Plato's *On Banqueting*,'

and Clearchus in the '*Praise of Plato*,' and Anaxilides in the second book of '*On Philosophers*,' state that there was a story at Athens," which then follows, being the Plutarchian version of the myth (except that the vision of Apollo is not apparently in a dream) with additional details. Speusippus was Plato's nephew and successor (died *c.* 335 B.C.); Clearchus was a pupil of Aristotle (i.e. *floruit c.* 320 B.C.); Anaxilides seems to be otherwise unknown. Plato was born in 428 B.C.

Now it is to be noticed first that the work in which Speusippus is alleged to have recorded the story purported to be a work of Plato, not of Speusippus himself at all: hence it is possible that its ascription to Speusippus by Diogenes Laertius was also mistaken. And secondly, Diogenes does not claim for one moment that these authorities asserted that Plato was the son of Apollo; but that they referred to a "yarn" which was going the round at Athens, and this yarn was the sole support for the myth: a very different thing from the support of Speusippus and Clearchus. Indeed it is perfectly obvious that the authorities quoted disbelieved the yarn, or Diogenes would have stated their testimony to the fact as well as their testimony to the existence of the rumour. The testimony to the Virgin Birth of our Lord makes an interesting contrast to this, being offered with emphatic confidence by two separate and independent and reliable writers, in considerable detail, and with every internal appearance of being derived from the only persons who could ever have had first-hand knowledge of the facts.

Saint Jerome (*c.* A.D. 346-420) repeats the references given by Diogenes Laertius, but relates the story (perhaps accidentally) in the same way as did Apuleius (Jerome, *adv. Jovin.* i. 42).

VIII

THE DOCTRINE OF THE VIRGIN BIRTH

HITHERTO what has engaged our attention has been a purely historical inquiry into the evidence for the Virgin Birth of Christ and into the degree of probability which might be claimed for the theory that the doctrine in the creed arose by accident or design from false premisses. Our conclusion, if the author has been able to carry his readers with him, is that the evidence is thoroughly good and consistent and trustworthy, and that even were the evidence otherwise there is no likelihood, so far as historical considerations indicate, that the doctrine could have been derived from any other source than fact. The authority of a statement of Saint Luke, whose opportunities were fully matched by his extraordinary capacity as an historical writer, is as high as that of any human being can be; and he unquestionably teaches the Virgin Birth. The same doctrine is affirmed with every show of confidence by the author of the first gospel, whose statements rest on the solid foundation of the testimony of the early Palestinian Church. The peculiarities of text exhibited in certain "Western" manuscripts have been shown to imply nothing contradictory to the general evidence in favour of the truth of the doctrine, and in particular any problems raised by the readings of the early Sinai manuscript of the Syriac version have been seen to be capable of an easy solution. The independence of the two accounts in Matthew and Luke does not involve them in mutual inconsistency; on the contrary, they fall without any difficulty into the framework of a unified narrative and thus attest the correctness of the history based upon them. The ostensible

silence observed upon the subject by the other evangelists and Saint Paul can be in part explained, and in part is to be regarded as less absolute than might appear superficially. And of the theories put forward in the hope of showing a means by which the doctrine might have been produced without the fact having occurred, the first, that suggesting deduction from primitive dogmatic statements, holds no water, the second, proposing an inference from the misapplication of the Isaianic prophecy, is not supported by the evidence, and the third, based on comparative study of pagan legend, seems contrary to reason and knowledge.

It will be readily confessed by most of those who reject the doctrine that their incredulity is primarily caused by theoretical considerations, and that the attempt to undermine the historical evidence is initiated and sustained by preconceived objections, not by the presence of obvious flaws in our authorities. If no miracle were alleged in the sources, no one would ever have attacked those sources, and the fact maintained therein would have been accepted as a plain matter of history. If the fact had been one of ordinary experience such as might have been repeated or tested by experiment, and the authorities had been secular instead of ecclesiastical, both fact and authorities would have been welcomed as contributing to knowledge with a simple directness which is found only too uncommonly in the reconstruction of the distant past. But since such a welcome is withheld by some, because of preconceived objections, it is of not a little importance for the defender of the historical evidence to advance whatever there may be of theoretical support, not of miracles in general, which would be out of place in this discussion, but of the particular miracle involved in the historical narrative of the Incarnation.

It is not pretended that with our limited knowledge of the ways of God in the universe we are in a position to say that only by means of a Virgin Birth could God have mediated an Incarnation. To do so without clearer proof than we can possibly arrive at would be to share in an attitude of intellectual arrogance and wilful mental narrowness against which the truly reasonable man is bound to protest, wherever it may be found. But it is entirely

permissible to indicate that so far as our knowledge and experience go we cannot see how else God could have done it without abrogating the exercise of those principles by which so far as we can ascertain He regulates His dealings with His creation ; and we can try to show that the fact of the Virgin Birth, guaranteed by history, is consonant with and not as some allege opposed to all we know of nature. That is what we shall attempt to do in the following pages. The isolated fact must be lifted into its place in the scheme of existence and exhibited in its permanent relations to the whole of mundane history and scientific knowledge, if it is ever to be apprehended in its proper significance as a philosophic truth.

The first of our theoretical arguments will deal with the more general question of the consonance of the fact of the Virgin Birth with what we know of nature as a whole. And this necessitates that nature, which is used in a number of different senses, should be first defined. The word is employed in the first place to denote the visible material and psychic universe as opposed to the spiritual created being, man. Natural in this sense is distinguished from artificial : for instance, when we speak of a natural causeway between two precipices, we imply that causeways usually are the product of man's thought and labour, but that here is a case in which man's art has been forestalled by the (apparently) accidental working of the material forces employed by God. Or it is distinguished from moral, as when we speak of the conquest of the natural craving for food being overcome by the application of the human will of the " hunger-striker " : in this case natural refers to the animal part of our composition as opposed to our specifically human endowments.

Again, nature is used in a different sense which just includes humanity. And in this sense it is used primarily of humanity as it is, not as it ought to be : that is to say, it denotes man in many ways morally weak and prone to succumb to various, but not normally to all, temptations, and may be paraphrased as a rule by the word ordinary. It is natural, in this sense, for a hungry man to steal, or for a man of ungoverned temper to murder, or for any man to resent an injury, just as it is for man to build

cities and till the ground. The relatively unnatural man is the one who is habitually and temperamentally good, or who lives by preference on a desert island, or who in cold blood and for no pecuniary advantage murders his children. Still under this second sense of nature a secondary meaning must be distinguished, by which we refer to man in his proper state of ideal virtue, the state for which he was created, from which we believe his sinfulness is a terrible degeneration, and towards which God inspires and aids him to strive, so that in his latter end he may regain the moral level to which by his spiritual constitution he properly belongs. It is thus truly unnatural for man to be sinful, because he was constituted for goodness, and the object of his existence is to attain perfection by the exercise of all his faculties in accordance with moral virtue. Christ's humanity was natural in this latter sense, though not of course in the former sense of an acquired second-nature of sinfulness.

Finally, natural is perhaps sometimes used, though the use is misleading and confusing, of the whole of God's known operations, whether unmediated, or mediated through angels or men, and whether absolute, or conditioned by the response of some one or more parts of His creation. Natural here means in accordance with the nature of God, and in this sense obviously the whole creation and all that can take place therein is natural. But the usual name for this is not natural, but moral and rational. Under this head, whichever name is attached to it, are included miracles, which are expressions of a spiritual power that is both moral and rational, and hence in full accordance with the nature of God and natural to Him, but belongs to a higher sphere than can be compassed and controlled by direct human action (or nature in sense) and is therefore called supernatural. Of course it must not be supposed that God even in miracles works irrationally. He is a God of laws and order in the natural sphere only because He is so in His own nature : so that His supernatural actions are governed, all the more than are His actions in the natural order, upon settled principles. Only these principles of His spiritual operation are different from and higher than those of His natural or physical operation, inasmuch as

they express more adequately the fullness of the nature of God. We shall see that as the Person of Christ was divine, being one Person of the Godhead, some circumstances in connexion with His Incarnation were not natural except in this third sense, but were in ordinary language supernatural.

It will no doubt have been noticed that in this definition of nature the different meanings of the term fall into a series. Natural has been explained progressively as meaning in accordance with the constitution (1) of infra-spiritual existences, (2) of man, as he is and as he is meant to be, and (3) of God. And it has been said that in ordinary speech the peculiar manifestations of nature in the last sense are best described as supernatural, since that word expresses what is above nature in the other senses. But as a matter of fact, nature in each sense is above or higher than nature in the sense immediately below it, and may quite properly be said to be *supra naturam* relatively to the lower stage in the series. In other words, human nature is supernatural from the point of view of non-human existence, and infra-natural from the point of view of God's own proper power.

Now it is obvious from the gospels that when our Saviour took upon Him true human nature (sense 2), during His incarnate life He normally limited Himself, in respect of the human nature of Him, to the exercise of such powers as are proper to ordinary humanity; and it was but rarely that His divine Person chose openly to break the bonds in which it seemed to confine its activity and proceeded to act through His humanity in an obviously supernatural way. In accordance with this principle He allowed Himself to be affected as other men are affected by external events and the actions of His fellow men: He permitted such things to influence Him in the same way that they would have influenced any ordinary human being. For instance, He declined to summon legions of angels to prevent His arrest, and allowed to run its full course in His own case the normal sequence which ordinarily follows the nailing of a man to a cross, even up to and including the result of sundering spirit and body. It will therefore make a considerable difference to anybody's view of the

circumstances of the Incarnation whether he regards it too as having been merely an event in the process of nature (senses 1 and 2), or as having been an irruption of the supernatural into the natural world. If it was one event in a series, through which ran the natural thread of physical or human causation ; if, like His physical death, Christ's entry into the world was a thing done to Him instead of by Him, a work wrought upon Him as a passive object, instead of a work wrought by Him as an active agent ; if the immediate cause of His entry into the human sphere was seated in the human sphere ; then we should expect, from the analogy of His other acts of submission while on earth to the conditions and limitations of earthly laws of causation, that nothing supernatural would have marked the manner of His coming into the world. If, on the other hand, an entirely new and unique event was taking place in history, above not only the experience but the capacity of either physical nature or man ; if, so far from just a man being brought as a passive object into the world, what was really happening was that God as an active creative personality was Himself and of His own motion proceeding and descending into the world ; if this coming in from outside was neither caused nor conditioned by any material or human antecedent whatsoever ; then, though we could hardly say that a Virgin Birth was the necessary means by which He must have come, we have every justification for the statement that a special circumstance of that kind is only what might well be expected in the given case.

Now obviously the Incarnation was not a work wrought by man, far less by physical nature, upon God. Man did not bring God down from heaven to be incarnate. And as man did not cause the Incarnation, so he could not condition the manner of it. He had nothing whatever to do with it : it was a free act of God. But it is still true that God acts upon settled principles, being a God of order and reason ; and we must therefore consider whether the Incarnation was an event different in kind from all other events, and consequently to be rightly treated as conditioned by a different and higher set of laws than those which govern the entry of other men into the world. Does the Incarnation provide the first and only example of a new

nature and kind of creation, or merely the finest instance of one of the old kinds, namely, the nature and the creation of ordinary human beings ?

It may be well to point out that in any case there are definite breaks in the scale of created things. They can all be arranged in order, more or less precisely, in ascending scale of importance or development : but it is not possible to step from one point on the scale to the next with a stride of the same length in every case. There is, for example, a complete break at the point at which life first appears. The material structures of animate and of inanimate objects can be compared, and perhaps even to some extent comparatively arranged ; but the fact remains that in one case there is life present and in another there is not. A new element has been introduced, and an absolute break made in the smooth progress of the scale, which scientists are now frankly confessing that they cannot explain in terms of physical science. The continuous creative force of God's will, which holds all things in being, has introduced a new kind of existence which has to be explained by different principles : we may be able to make a synthetic diamond, but we certainly cannot make a synthetic dog.

The gulf between the diamond and the dog is not caused by the possession of a material body by one and not by the other, for they both have material bodies ; but one has not life and the other has. God has given the dog some control over the operation of the laws by which the divine power reproduces more dogs : in other words, God has conditioned His creative power in the case of living things, by making it relative to a faculty in the creature which is not mechanical but psychic. This faculty of acting as the instrument in the reproduction of its own kind is characteristic of a living creature and distinguishes it from the inanimate creation, making it impossible for the total existence of the living creature, and more particularly for the origin of its characteristic feature, to be explained in terms of those observed regularities, or " natural laws," which condition the existence of inanimate substances. There is one set of natural laws for inanimate nature, and another for animate nature, each proper to the nature of each. And yet the part they have in common,

if we consider the material body of the living being in abstraction from the characteristic properties that are peculiar to it, is governed by the same laws. In so far as the dog which we just took as an illustration is composed of matter, that is in respect of his body, he is subject to the same chemical reactions as an inanimate body made of the same chemical substances. A diamond is entirely and a dog's body is largely composed of carbon : and they can both be burnt. It is important to remember this. They can both be treated on the same level for those purposes, but only for those purposes, in respect of which their natural constitution is on a level. In this instance the object higher in the scale is on a level with the object lower in the scale in respect of its possessing a material body, but differs from it in respect of being able to reproduce its kind.

The next break occurs when we step from the infra-human creation to man. Though man is like the animals in certain ways, and resembles some of them very closely in superficial details, there could never be any doubt in the mind of an observer that a deep rift separates the two classes. The highest and most intelligent animal could never on a thorough survey be mistaken for a human being, although for a time he might be able with training to be made to mimic certain of man's habits. The difference lies in the fact that man is endowed with the power of personal self-expression, not only in being able to speak and express himself in language, intellectually, but even more in being a responsible agent able to express himself morally, in action. In theological language, man has a spirit or soul (*πνεῦμα*) and is a spiritual being, while the beasts possess only animal life (*ψυχή*, also frequently translated "soul," to the great confusion of tongues). This makes it quite impossible to employ language which is applicable to the brute creation to describe the action of men : their constitution and nature are different, and the natural laws governing each class are different too : what belongs to the nature of the one may be quite contrary to the nature of the other. Yet here again there is a common element, and if this common element is abstracted in thought from the whole man, it will not be found to differ from the

corresponding part of the beast. Man will be found to possess a material body, and to be endowed with "psychic" or animal life: abstract the rational forethought and the moral self-determination of his actions, and he will be found in the purely physical sphere to have a faculty of reproducing his kind exactly similar to that enjoyed by the animal world, and a faculty of being consumed by fire and undergoing other chemical changes, in respect of the material part of his composition, exactly similar to that observed alike in dog and diamond.

We now come to the last break in the scale, if indeed it be a break, and have to consider wherein lay the difference, if any, between the nature of Christ and the nature of ordinary men. Inasmuch as He was perfect man we cannot look for any difference by way of diminution of the nature of man, but such distinction as there may exist must be by way of addition. He had a material body, He enjoyed animal life, and He was possessed of a human spirit. Yet it is affirmed by Christians that He was (and is) more than man; He is also God. He is the Creator, through whom all things were made. And He is also by virtue of His Incarnation the consummation of the creation, the summit of the pyramid to whom all created things tend, the key-stone in the arch of creation who binds all into one and holds all fast. If we would know the fairest product of God's creative power, and see its completest embodiment, we look at Christ. If we would reach the very ultimate goal of evolution, it never can exist except in Christ. If we would understand the purpose unifying the whole apparent medley of the universe, it lies revealed in Christ. He is the One and the All, who is in all things and all things in Him. Another human being would just be a single man, an individual example of the species, a particular: Christ is Man, Himself the species (and the genus too), the Universal.

It follows from this that Christ Incarnate was unique, and herein will be found the fact which differentiates Him from all other men. Though man, He was far more than man, just as men, though animal, are far more than animal. Now we have seen that it is one function of human beings to reproduce their kind. This implies that they

are produced by their kind. Right back to the beginning this is so. We may be the collateral relatives in a remote degree both of the apes and of the cabbages ; but we are not descended from them in the direct line. Our ancestry and theirs may meet in some infinitely far off simple arrangement of living cells, but the fact remains that once the lineage diverged their ancestors produced vegetables and brutes, while ours produced human beings. The lower forms of living things are produced by their kind : and humanity is produced by its kind. But Incarnate God was unique : He had no kind except Himself by whom He might have been produced ; in fact, it is not correct to say He was produced at all, for, since He was already personally existent, when the time came for Him to be manifested in the flesh He produced Himself : He was the subject, as well as the object of the action ; not created, even in respect of His physical body and human spirit, but self-creating, by the purely divine mediation of the Holy Ghost. It is no objection to this statement of the matter to say that just before we claimed that animal life was characterized by reproducing its kind, and hence by being produced by its kind, but that here while claiming animal life for Christ we deny that He was so produced by His kind. We do not make this denial, but modify the terms in which the characteristic needs to be expressed. In being both self-created and self-creating, so far from lacking this characteristic, Christ exemplified it in its highest and most literal form.

From the fact that Incarnate God had a human spirit, life, and a material body, it does not necessarily follow that these were created in precisely the same manner as those of ordinary men. Christ the Creator in the creation of a normal human being conditions His creative power by making it subject to co-operation with the action of the human kind : Christ the Creator in the self-manifestation of God in the flesh, would by all analogy condition His power not by reference to the nature of the lower element of His new creation, but by reference to the higher element, that is, the divine. In other words, it seems antecedently probable that the birth of the Incarnate God should not have been natural in sense two, but supernatural, which we said was equivalent to natural in sense three, that is, in accordance with the nature of God.

We have seen an analogous case at the bottom of the scale of nature. The diamond is a material body, and the dog partakes in this material nature. Yet all the time he transcends a merely material nature, and taken as himself he stands on a higher level of the natural scale ; and he is produced in quite a different way. So Incarnate God partakes to the full of human nature, yet transcends it all the time : though true man he is not " a man," but is always equally true God : just as the dog though material has not a material individuality, but is always also true animal. The fact that Christ had true body, life, and spirit is irrelevant to the question how those endowments were created, just as the possession by the dog of a material body is irrelevant to the question how that material body is formed.

It is true that when we rise to the next break in the scale and compare the lower forms of sentient things with man, both are produced in what is, in principle, the same manner, by means of sex. But this is simply because the characteristic which differentiates man from the rest has no relation to reproduction, being thus unlike the feature which differentiates inanimate things from the various lower embodiments of life. When we come to the comparison of man with Incarnate God the differentiating feature does precisely lie, as we have seen, in their respective origins. Man is a created being, with no part in the process of his creation except that he can initiate or decline to initiate that process ; he can set the laws of God in motion but cannot otherwise control them : and God, in the creation of man, is limited to the extent that by His own natural order He is subject to that degree of co-operation with the action of human parents. But Christ was in the first place, as God, one Person of the self-existent Deity : and in respect of His humanity He was self-creating ; that is, He was subject to no co-operation with any created thing or being, but was acting in His proper function as creative Word, in union with the operation of the divine Father by the Holy Ghost. " Who although He be God and Man, yet He is not two, but one Christ. One, not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by taking of the Manhood into God." Mary was not given power to subject God

to the way of physical nature and reduce Him to the level of her humanity ; but God wrought a supernatural work upon Mary and thereby took of her substance into Himself. In His own nature He is infinitely higher than mankind, but He deigned to stoop and take into His existence a full perfect and sufficient share in our lower nature, in which He continues to participate to the end of the ages. That He should have carried out this great condescension in a way natural to Himself is hardly a matter for surprise.

Having said so much upon the general question of the consonance of the Virgin Birth with nature, we must consider two difficulties which would arise in detail if a naturalistic theory were adopted about Christ's birth. The first of these two difficulties will be more easily recognized if something is said of a very ancient heresy that a professing Christian would hardly be likely to adopt to-day, which nevertheless in essence presents just the same difficulty as the theory of a natural parentage for Jesus Christ. The old heresy is of this kind. Jesus and Christ were held to be the names of two distinct persons, the one human and the other divine. The Redeemer was a sort of compound of the two. It was seen that the power to redeem mankind could only reside in one who was both divine and human, but the Incarnation was misunderstood, or set aside on account of certain philosophical pre-possessions. The heavenly person then, or Christ, descended from His abode in the fifteenth year of Tiberius and united Himself to the human person Jesus, who was at that time about thirty years old. Now this involves either that there were two personalities acting jointly in the Redeemer, or that from the moment of union the personality of the man Jesus was destroyed to make room for that of the heavenly Christ. If the latter alternative were true, and the Christ, to secure manhood for Himself, destroys the personality to which the manhood which He is assuming belongs, He is murdering the first of those He comes to save. Added to this, it is most unlikely that a human spirit and body could continue to exist divorced from, and unconditioned by the impress of, the personality to which they would in the course of nature be inseparably con-

joined. In other words, whether its proper personality in any particular case be human or divine, humanity only exists as the embodiment of that proper personality.¹ So that we may dismiss the one alternative, that the Christ descending took for Himself the humanity of the man Jesus and destroyed the personality of the man.

But it is equally impossible to accept the other alternative. If Christ united Himself to a single individual, He only took upon Himself the nature of that individual. Let this person's name for the sake of argument be called X. Then Christ by uniting Himself to X assumed not manhood but X-hood, that is to say, manhood qualified and conditioned in certain definite ways. That would mean that Christ had no direct affinity to all men, but only to the one man X, and the whole point of His becoming man Himself would be lost. For He required to make Himself akin to all that He might be able to enter into all and save them : if His humanity is peculiar to one He only enters one, and can only save that one. The whole point of the Incarnation lies in the fact that Christ's humanity was properly and peculiarly His own, unconditioned and unlimited by conjuncture with any other personality than that of Christ, yet, by the very fact of being thus free from the particular limitations and peculiarities of individual men, generally proper to all men. If two personalities, one of the Christ and the other of the man Jesus to whom the Christ is united, remain in the single tenement of body, life, and spirit which the Christ is about to employ for the purpose of redemption, then that tenement is appropriate only to the single man Jesus, and can only be employed as an instrument in the redemption of Jesus, not in that of the remainder of mankind. The personal characteristics of the man Jesus make His humanity distinct and different from that of other particular men : if the Christ fits Himself into that particular humanity, He has made Himself into a certain shape which will not match the figure of another human being ; He has circumscribed Himself into a bound which excludes all other separate individualities. In other words, if the

¹ So-called " dual personality " is a pathological phenomenon probably due to some degree of dissolution or disintegration of the control which ought to be exercised by the proper personality.

Christ is united to one personal man, that man monopolizes the Christ and robs all the rest of the world of their redemption.

Such a theory then of the union of an earthly individual man with the heavenly divine Person presents the most profound difficulties. Yet something exactly similar is involved in the supposition entertained by some that our Lord though God was also the son of Joseph. This supposition really implies that the heavenly Christ united Himself to a human foetus begotten by Joseph. But when a child is begotten in the course of nature and brought to the birth, he or she is a personal being ; however undeveloped the personality of an infant may be, still it is there existing, and potentially completed. Human parents do not only bear the responsibility of being agents under God in the creation of a living human body, or even indirectly in that of the human spirit which is associated with the body of each newly created child. They are also indirect agents in the production of a new personality, since consequently on the action of the human parents a new human personality is brought into the world, to which the new-born child's humanity belongs. That is to say, if Joseph begat a human foetus, it would naturally have been a personal foetus.

But if our Lord's humanity was thus begotten by Joseph, what happened to the natural personality of the foetus? Did it remain associated with Christ's human nature in a secondary capacity, and receive the redemption of which by its presence it was robbing the rest of mankind? Or did Christ destroy it and thus begin His mission by murdering a soul He came to save? The only alternative is that by a special miracle God secured that this one foetus should be unaccompanied by a new personality, so as to leave room for the pre-existing personality of Christ to take possession. But if that were the case, the miracle would not be supernatural, but contra-natural. It is the nature of the human species that a new personality should attach to every foetus: it would be contrary to nature if that consequence failed in a particular case to follow on the normal physical antecedent of human parentage. God would be breaking His own habits or laws, in the purely natural sphere, in order to secure for Christ a

human origin : He would not be giving an example of a new and higher nature, but interrupting the sequence of the old. And this to no purpose. For what Christ required in order to redeem mankind was not a human origin at all, but human nature.

The second difficulty has to do with Christ's sinlessness. It is inconceivable that He was not absolutely free, not only from actual sin, but from the inherited taint and tendency to sin to which Saint Augustine gave the name of *peccatum originis*, or "original sin." Yet that taint and tendency, which "are of the nature of sin," are universally found to be implanted in our human nature. They are part of the inheritance we owe to the solidarity of mankind in common families. In this respect as in others man reproduces his kind. Just as in the Epistle to the Hebrews the sons of Levi are said to have paid tithes through Abraham to Melchizedek, because Levi "was yet in the loins of his father, when Melchizedek met him"¹; so through Adam, the type of our common humanity, all men are sinful, by reason of the sin of Adam which he sinned while we were yet, so to say, in his loins. We are sinful, because we are the reproduction of our fathers who were sinful. In this, theology and experience concur.

Now if Christ was not begotten of human parents, but came from His glory and instead of being acted upon, acted ; not uniting Himself with any elements of potential manhood that pre-existed in the way of human parentage, but self-creating out of the substance of the Virgin that manhood with which He purposed to enshrine Himself, by a new creative act ; then it is possible for us to gain some notion of the way in which the inheritance of sin was avoided. He escaped it because He did not use those elements in which it lay, but fashioned for Himself His humanity anew. But if He was born in the ordinary manner of human parentage, it is difficult to see how He freed Himself from the sinful character which accompanies humanity so transmitted, except by a second special miracle contrary to the nature of such transmission. If His sinless Incarnation was governed by the supernatural principles of His own higher

¹ Heb. vii. 10.

nature, it was not contrary to physical nature, because it was altogether outside the sphere of physical nature. But if it was not thus an irruption of the supernatural, it must have caused an interruption of the natural : and once more, to no purpose.

The following words express the problem well. "How was a sinless human nature possible? To speak of a sinless human nature is to speak of something essentially outside the continuity of the species. The growth of self-conscious experience, expressed at its finest and best in the formulæ of advancing science, has emphasized the strength of heredity. Each generation is bound to the last by indissoluble ties. To sever the bond, in any one of its colligated strands, involves a break in descent. It involves the introduction of a new factor, to which the taint of sin does not attach. If like produces like, the element of unlikeness must come from that to which it has itself affinity."¹ If we believe in a Virgin Birth mediated by God, the element of unlikeness just referred to is explicable by its affinity to the nature of its author. But if we say that there was no break in the natural descent of our Lord from Adam, we must suppose a special interference with the laws of nature to have been perpetrated by the author of the natural order.

One final topic needs to be briefly treated before our theoretical considerations of the Virgin Birth are brought to a close. It has been suggested that the fact may have been, broadly speaking, as the gospels relate, and the explanation of it what is scientifically known as parthenogenesis. The exact nature of the proposition may be gathered from the following account of parthenogenesis by the late Dr. Jenkinson. "It is most assuredly certain that for the production of a normal individual both [i.e. male and female] pronuclei are not a necessity. In the first place, there is the phenomenon of parthenogenesis, natural and artificial. In the former the ovum develops without fertilization by the sperm and without artificial assistance (as in Aphidæ and some other Insects, and in certain Crustacea). In the latter the stimulus usually given by the sperm

¹ Dr. Sanday in *H.D.B.*, vol. ii., p. 647 A.

is replaced experimentally by some physical or chemical agent. Thus the ovum of a sea-urchin or Mollusc may be stimulated by treatment with hyper-tonic sea-water, or butyric acid or other substance, or by mechanical shock, or a lowering of the temperature; in the case of the frog it is sufficient to pierce the egg with a fine needle. In all these instances some physical or chemical alteration (or both) is produced in the egg, as a result of which it begins to segment and develop. The process, if care is taken, may be perfectly normal, and the individual reach the adult condition. A sexually mature (male) sea-urchin has been reared in this way.

“In all cases of parthenogenesis only the female pronucleus is present.

“The converse is seen in what is called merogony, where the egg (of a sea-urchin, worm, or Mollusc) is divided into two halves, only one of which contains the nucleus. Both halves can be fertilized, the nucleate and the enucleate, and will develop into normal larvæ. In the latter case only the male pronucleus is present.”¹

In short, the suggested explanation of the birth of Christ is of this kind. In certain lower animals parthenogenesis is the rule, or can at least be stimulated artificially, by giving to the female pre-existent element the proper chemical or physical environment. It is then theoretically possible that if the right stimulus could be discovered and applied, without injury, to the delicate mechanism of a more highly organized creature, such as the human mother, a corresponding result might well ensue. Cannot the fact of the Virgin Birth be interpreted along these lines?

The advantage in such a view, from the standpoint of those who promote it, is that, the occurrence of parthenogenesis having been once granted in Christ's case, His birth could then, without setting the evidence for the absence of a human father at defiance, be regarded as natural (in sense 2) instead of supernatural. But that is precisely the objection to it. The more closely that birth is made to approximate to an ordinary birth, the greater are the intellectual difficulties in believing that the child so born was other than an ordinary child, with a human

¹ *Vertebrate Embryology*, pp. 87, 88 (published 1913).

personality and endowed with the heredity of sinfulness attached to other children. If Christ was begotten, whether by Joseph or by the appropriate direct action of God, of pre-existent elements in which the principle of life was already enshrined, a special miracle, otherwise uncalled for, must have been required to prevent the natural consequences of the employment of those elements. That this is true in the matter of personality needs no further argument. That it is true also of the transmission of original sin seems also probable. Certainly vast numbers of Christians believe and have believed that the Blessed Virgin was freed from sin by a special miracle, in view of her foreseen merits. But it does not follow that her freedom was intended to do more than honour the presence of the Holy One, so that the casket might be fit for the jewel. His purity was secured apart from that by the very fact of His being born out of the way of physical nature. And whatever may be thought of this point, yet a further miracle would have been needed, in contravention of the natural constitution of the world, if Christ was parthenogenetically born. For a certain appropriate stimulation is required to cause parthenogenesis. Now it is abundantly clear that such stimulation must proceed from physical or chemical causes, which do not naturally arise, and cannot be artificially applied, in the case of human beings. God then must be regarded, on this theory, as having once more interfered with His own laws, and applied this stimulation Himself by a special interposition in no degree less supernatural than His action would have been upon the theory we have been concerned to uphold throughout the chapter, but in a manner rather contrary to physical nature. The only gain, from the naturalistic point of view, is that the miracle is put one step further back: the loss is, that Christ is identified with an individual man and not with universal manhood; He is no longer unique, for the divine experiment could be repeated.

This theory, therefore, cannot be accepted. It is superficially attractive, but on examination proves to be intellectually difficult and quite uncalled for, as well as theologically unsound. For the theology of the matter was stated once and for all by Saint John, when he said, with ultimate

reference to the supernatural birth at Bethlehem, "begotten not out of physical elements (οὐκ ἐξ αἱμάτων), nor through natural instinct, nor by a man's will, but of God."¹ In such wise we believe that God was born into human nature. His mother was maiden not only in her relations with her espoused husband, but also in the most secret mysteries of her own body.

"He came al so still
 There his mother was,
 As dew in April
 That falleth on the grass.

He came al so still
 To his mother's bour,
 As dew in April
 That falleth on the flour.

He came al so still
 There his mother lay,
 As dew in April
 That falleth on the spray.

Mother and maiden
 Was never none but she;
 Well may such a lady
 Goddes mother be."

¹ John i. 13.

EPILOGUE :

THE PHILOSOPHY OF LIBERALIS

FROM time to time it happens that a Christian thinker, setting out with an intense study and contemplation of some one part or aspect of the Christian faith, and brooding on it almost to morbidity, and sometimes further, loses his grip of solid realities and precipitates himself into some abysmal heresy ; which is a cause of amazement to the later ages of men wise after the event. He broods so long upon the strength, importance, and convenience of some particular cellar in the Church's mansion, that he determines to live solely in that apartment for the future, and tries to pull down the upper storeys of the house as being unnecessary, and even prejudicial to proper ventilation of the cellar. So from over-emphasis and instability his teaching rapidly disintegrates into inconsistency, and passes from disparagement to denial of doctrines no less important than the one which fascinates and absorbs him.

With reference to the Virgin Birth of Christ a number of Christian people are in this sorry plight to-day, having arrived there partly through over-emphasizing the reality of Christ's humanity. They have brooded so deeply on the fact that Jesus was true man that they tend to deny implicitly in practice that while He lived on earth He was anything more than a man. They seem to say that when God deigned to become a man we must expect to see the noblest specimen of humanity therein exhibited indeed, but still a man like any other men : whereas what the Church says is that when manhood was taken into God we therein saw exemplified the infinite condescension of One akin, it is true, to every one of us in His human nature,

but never in the least the counterpart of any of us ; not merely the climax of humanity but the veritable manifestation of God is there in question. But it is obvious that the " humanitarians " who brood on the true human nature of Christ to the exclusion of His Virgin Birth are in part watering their error with buckets from the Christian well.

But this is not entirely the source of their heresy ; and if they had had no other force behind them they would not have drifted so far from the bank nor have remained on their distant shoal so persistently. The strongest influence that reaches them is external to Christianity in essence, and even contrary to it. Contagion from without the citadel is responsible in this case for more evil than are the perverse humours within it. This contagion consists in the influence of " science," falsely so called, and still more falsely claiming to be philosophy. For there still exists and lingers and permeates the atmosphere, very widespread though very subtle, the sort of pseudo-scientific philosophy which definitely used to cherish a prejudice against religion, and its diffused influence extends to many people who are really religious and whose minds would be most painfully shocked if they could be brought to realize the nature and source of the assumptions upon which they argue. This sort of " philosophy " or " rationalism " does not embrace in its survey the evidence of every fact that can be reasonably ascertained, but prejudices every question by excluding from consideration all spiritual facts to which either Christianity or secular experience bear witness. Thus it comes about that we are confronted with " philosophies of religion " which leave out not merely Saint Paul, or even the whole teaching Church, but Christ Himself : and thus it is that we are met by " theologians " who would begin an investigation of miracles, professedly scientific, by subscribing in all serious and candid simplicity to the formula thus enunciated by one such inquirer, that " in practice, it is true, to admit a miracle is to commit intellectual suicide."

The object of this Epilogue is to emphasize as strongly as possible from which quarter it is that the wind blows scepticism upon the Virgin Birth. This wind springs from the region of the rationalistic " science " just described,

from which the relevant consideration is excluded before the inquirer ventures to formulate his conclusions.

Liberalis is a philosopher who teaches theology: he is perhaps something of an historian besides. As a philosopher he has long ago passed beyond the philosophic ineptitude of the Spencerian epoch; he teaches that spirit is different from matter and superior to it, and that it can to some extent control it; he admits, being a Theist, the theoretical possibility of miracles occurring, and cheerfully concedes that there is no philosophical *a priori* objection to the truth of the Virgin Birth. But nevertheless he denies the Virgin Birth, on grounds which need to be examined carefully, for on analysis they are seen to presuppose neither historical criticism nor the philosophy which Liberalis professes to follow, but the old dead "rationalism" which Liberalis with his lips rejects. He rather dogmatically asserts, if you care to argue with him, that the only miracles on record of which there is really adequate historical proof (excluding from consideration those alleged in the Bible) are miracles of healing, such as may be fairly easily explained by those mysterious empirical laws of psychology now believed to exist, but of whose character little beyond the bare fact of their existence has as yet been ascertained. From this contention he proceeds to infer by analogy alone, and false analogy at that, that only miracles of this one description have ever occurred: no matter how circumstances may differ, however exceptional may have been the agent through whom God Almighty has worked, not though God Himself be recorded to have added by direct working one final corner-stone to the edifice of His incessant creative activity, still Liberalis is unconvinced: no miracle, he says, was ever done by any one beyond the disentanglement, for persons of slight education and therefore prone to credulity, of their complicated nervous disorders. No more is warranted by history, says Liberalis.

What does this statement mean? That there is no adequate historical evidence for miracles in the New Testament? Not at all. It only means that there is no evidence, for instance, in the proceedings of the Royal Society for Huxley having walked upon the sea; that in

the archives of modern European states no Emperor, King, or President is recorded to have raised the dead ; that on the other hand Liberalis has discovered (what nobody troubles to deny) that sometimes an obviously worthless chronicler will fill his pages with a series of obviously imaginary wonders ; and that Liberalis takes such a mechanical view of historical events, and such a pessimistic account of the power of God, that he rejects as legendary falsehoods all the deeds attributed by competent witnesses to Christ and His closest followers, because forsooth Munchausen was a liar, Huxley was not Messiah, and William II is not divine. Virgin births do not occur, he therefore says. He might with precisely equal truth say, Christs do not occur ; or rather, each has occurred but once.

Nothing more than healing of disordered nerves is warranted by " history," says Liberalis, and to confirm his " historical " conclusions he proceeds with pick and crowbar, in a way that would be permitted to no secular historian, to make havoc of the important evidence contributed on the other side by the New Testament, evidence which apart from intellectual preconceptions never would be, as it never has been, called in question.

This is the way of Liberalis. God governs the universe, he argues, in a fixed way, and the observed methods and fixed habits He employs to govern it are called laws. So far we all agree with Liberalis. It has been observed that a standing man sinks in water, unless the attraction of the earth exerted on his body be counteracted by some force, say that exerted by a gas-bag, acting on his body in the contrary direction. But it would appear from the gospels that Christ was capable of practising a more advanced illustration of the working of this law than is usually found to be possible. In fact without contradicting any previous laws, he introduced a new application of them to our notice, namely that by a power which can be directly exerted by God the force of gravity can be, not of course abolished, but counteracted, just as by the gas-bag. But Liberalis holds a different opinion. He thinks that God, having once in the beginning determined the laws of His action and set them working, should not only refuse to

suspend or abolish the operation of His laws (which would be, comparatively, a comprehensible position to adopt), but that He will not or cannot even in unique circumstances add to our knowledge of His ways by setting in motion a new force or a new law that mankind had previously had no opportunity for observing. The progressive development of God's creation was about to culminate at the Incarnation in the entrance into the created world of Very God, and thereby circumstances absolutely new in history were necessarily involved. The entry into the world of a sinless, pre-existing, and divine Person required a new law, that of virgin birth; yet it must be remembered that this law thus newly put into operation was only new to men. It was not a new law to God, for it would apply eternally to any Incarnation, even though in fact there never can be more Incarnations than the one that has already taken place; but it was a law fresh to human observation. It was in itself no more than the outcome of principles embodied in the old laws of natural human generation, but those principles were now directed to embrace the new and unique conditions of the Incarnation of Christ. Nevertheless Liberalis writes it down impossible that to suit the new conditions this fresh law should have been put in operation.

Liberalis is here simply conjuring up the old materialistic rationalism in a thin disguise. What he is here presenting to us, masquerading under the name of God, are the blind and mechanical forces of Nature materialistically conceived: strip off the name, and rationalism is discovered underneath, naked, though certainly ashamed. The philosophy upon which Liberalis relies in practice is seen to be in fact not the one he theoretically professes: it is Deistic, not Theistic. The latter, as he admits, would justify belief in miracles; but so far is it detached from Liberalis' life that he tacitly, unconsciously, declines to rely upon it: he has no working faith in its capacity to bear him, and will not trust his weight upon it though he placards it with the name of truth.

The Liberalis whom we have attempted to portray is a Churchman, perhaps even a cleric; but it is clear that his objection to the doctrine of the Virgin Birth does not

ultimately proceed from the side of his religion. It is not based fundamentally upon the mere desire to safeguard Christ's true humanity. It really arises from the unrecognized assumption of a mechanical philosophy of nature according to which it is not permissible to allow that anything can ever in history have taken place which is not capable of taking place in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is due to the attachment of unmerited importance to the general but not complete analogy between the events of those centuries and the events of the life of Christ. The argument from analogy is not a method of inference that is ever logically conclusive at the best of times : in this case it is manifestly an argument from false analogy. For in this instance the real evidence of history, which is mistakenly alleged to form the basis of Liberalis' argument, is set aside, or only looked at through the yellow spectacles of rationalistic materialism. And materialism, whether it be unabashedly confessed or (as in Liberalis) modestly veiled, is subversive of reason and religion alike.

If we turn for a moment to those who have cut themselves adrift in still more flagrant wise than Liberalis from traditional theology, we find that they represent the same principles : they face in the same direction, and are differentiated only by being more extensively and more intensely destructive. Liberalis, abiding still within the camp, refrains from denial of the Incarnation and professes, though perhaps in what seems sometimes rather an inconsistent way, the divinity of Christ. The advanced wing of Neo-rationalists would themselves be the first to admit that if by Christianity is meant any such religious system as has been ever distinguished by that name in the past then they reject it wholly and unconditionally. Their belief is that the whole development of dogmatic expression in Bible and creeds (and not merely a certain few dogmas) was founded upon cardinal mistakes, of fact as well as of theory : they find in the evangelists stumbling-blocks and in the apostles folly : they are now discerning the symptoms of a morbid possession with inflated fanatical delusions in our Lord. They are not merely spattered with the brush of rationalism ; they are rationalists pure and simple.

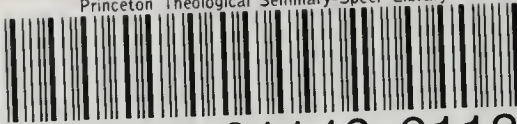
They not only deny the Virgin Birth because they and their contemporaries have never with the physical eye seen anybody who was virgin-born, but quite consistently deny that Jesus was Incarnate God on the ground that they and their contemporaries have never seen with the physical eye anybody who was Incarnate God. This wholesale shattering of what they consider to be idols affords a striking recommendation to their honesty, but puts them clearly outside the pale of Christianity in any intelligible meaning of the term. From the Christian point of view they can only be regarded as exponents of a new humanitarian ethic, based on a fresh enforcement of rationalized Judaism: for to them Jesus is only the last of the Hebrew prophets. Yet they are but carrying logically out the principles of Liberalis, which he employs in a more arbitrary and spasmodic fashion. This comparison helps to make it clear that his attack upon the Virgin Birth should not be taken to represent primarily the reaction of Christian instinct or even of brooding over-emphasis, but as a part unconsciously contributed from within the Christian fold to second the onslaught from without of the ravening wolf of mechanical rationalism. The faith is consistent and is a single whole: experience bears out more and more that if one thread in the pattern is cut, nothing else is needed but a steady pull for the whole tapestry to be unravelled. And that is a task for which there are not wanting persons ready to engage themselves, oncé Liberalis has cut the thread.

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